Community Development in Burma through Photography and Youth Education
Myanmar (Burma)
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Project Summary

This project used the technique of "community photography" to give underprivileged youths in Myanmar (Burma) the chance to practice photography and engage in discussions addressing community issues.

Over the course of eight weeks, 29 youth from two different schools in Yangon (Rangoon) and Magway states learnt interpersonal skills, character development, media literacy, and a better understanding about their environment. Photo exhibitions in the schools also allowed the youth to share their work with community members and open a dialogue on the themes they photographed.

I was also able to showcase the works of the students and spread the concept of community development through photographic education to NGO workers, students and lecturers at Chiang Mai University, Thailand, through a seminar and exhibition titled "Burmese Life through the Lenses," which I presented after the end of the project on 27th August 2010.

Project Details

From 16 June to 13 August, I conducted community photography sessions and exhibitions in two locations. For the first phase, fifteen youths from Yarzagyo Monastic School in South Dagon Township, Yangon, met twice a week for five weeks. The second phase lasted for two weeks, in Basic Education High School in Kamma village, Magway state, with fourteen youths. In both locations, a total of eight sessions were carried out, with an additional session for preparation of exhibitions. In Yangon, I spent the first four weeks holding two sessions each week and the final week for exhibition preparations and evaluation. In Magway, daily sessions were held, followed by three days of exhibition preparations and a day for evaluation. The second phase in Magway lasted shorter because I had to finish the project before the students' monthly school examinations.

We started each session by discussing a theme or topic based on community issues or personal skills (environmental issues, peace, time management skills, etc). Following that, I taught them aspects of the use of digital cameras (I used my Project for Peace funding to purchase twenty-five Sanyo VPC 1060 cameras) and photography techniques. The participants were then assigned the photography techniques and cameras to take photographs that somehow illuminated the theme discussed - the core of the "community photography" method. The participants in Yangon also benefited from a lesson on passport photography taught by a professional photographer in Yangon.

A school teacher in the Basic Education High School commented that the workshops created "positive energy" and motivated students to strive harder in other aspects of life, be it school work or family duties (the children help with house hold chores there, i.e. washing clothes or getting water from wells). In the evaluations, the participants said that they enjoyed taking the photographs, "because [we] are able to observe our surroundings in more depth." They also mentioned that the group critique sessions following the photographing assignments were valuable. Not only did these sessions give them constructive and positive feedback on their work, they also developed the courage and confidence to voice their opinions and learn from each other.

This was especially important, since getting the students to speak up in facilitated discussions was difficult. Many of them were shy at first and have little engagement with the issues that were raised in the sessions. Furthermore, they were not accustomed to interactive learning through discussions. Therefore, we had to engage in icebreaker activities to have a comfortable environment for the participants to speak up. I had difficulty in explaining some concepts due to the knowledge gap between the participants and I. To tackle this, I ensured that I had Burmese co-facilitators at the sessions, who helped to teach the sessions and to translate some ideas and concepts better.

It was also difficult to find a partner NGO for this project, due to the political sensitivities within the country right before the general elections in November 2010. Therefore, I approached the schools in Yangon and Magway independently and conducted the sessions, with the help of co-facilitators recruited through the schools and my acquaintances. In addition to the twenty-nine youth participants, I also used

the cameras during the two months to train six primary school teachers from the village and nine staff members from an NGO in Yangon on the use of cameras.

Beneficiaries and Sustainability

The youths benefited from soft and hard skills they developed through the program. The use of cameras and practicing was a skill they could apply in the future. The cameras that were used in the programs were left in the school, in the care of the head monk (in the Monastic School) and the Head Master (in the Basic Education High School). The program participants will be using these cameras to teach their fellow schoolmates, through peer-photography sessions during their school holidays. Leaving the cameras in the school allows the students to share their skills and knowledge with their peers, ensuring the sustainability of the project.

Photography skills not only benefit the participants but also the schools, which now have trained photographers to document school events such as prize-giving ceremonies and teacher-worshiping festivals, and to take photos for school identification cards. Prior to this program, the schools had to hire photographers for such events, straining their small budgets. The use of student photographers and cameras allows the schools to direct more funds to other uses such as the purchase of school supplies and scholarships for lower-income students.

Through this project, I realized that photography and media literacy (use of cameras and computers) is very much required but lacking in the country. The work of the program participants and the concept of using photography to promote community development and peace were shared with international scholars and NGO workers. With the help of Professor Tun Myint, Carleton College, and the Regional Center for Sustainable Development of Chiang Mai University, I was able to hold another photography exhibition and a seminar to share the project idea and to spread the word about Davis Foundation's 100 Projects for Peace.

Peace, Photography and Community Development

To me, peace comes in several forms. On the broadest level is an overarching international peace. There also peace within the community of a school or a classroom. On a personal level, there is inner peace, the ability to live in contentment. All forms of peace develop from communication and understanding because, in my opinion, conflict arises largely from misunderstanding.

This project promoted peace most directly on the community level, serving as platform for youth and community to engage in peaceful, constructive dialogues. Through discussions about the community issues and critiques of each other's work, the participants learned to communicate with and listen to each other. Through the preparation of the photo exhibitions, the youth worked together and appreciated the value of teamwork to achieve a common goal. The topics discussed also opened up their horizons beyond school curricula, planting seeds of curiosity and observation skills. The youths' motivation, confidence, and ability to learn more from each other will, I hope, play a role in promoting peace and development in their communities and their lives.

The exhibitions at the end of the sessions invited the community members (schoolmates, teachers, family members) to be a part of the project and peace building. During the exhibition, the viewers chatted with the participants, learning more about the photographs and the messages portrayed. Peace-building extends beyond the timeframe of the project, as the program participants share their knowledge gained with their schoolmates, using the cameras that were kept in their respective schools in the months to come.

The works of the students are also used to promote peace and understanding internationally. Their photographs of everyday Burmese life were exhibited in Thailand and will be exhibited in the United States. These exhibitions, I hope, will further promote dialogue and understanding about Burmese culture, challenge prior assumptions about Burma, and highlight the value of observation, communication and dialogue in peace and development.

Teaching photography techniques at Yarzagyo Monastic School

Teaching how to use cameras at Basic Education High School, Kamma

Participants preparing for the exhibition at Basic Education High School, Kamma