

## **Marist Asia Foundation input for Misesan Cara - addressing the Burmese Migrant Secondary Education Programme in Thailand**

My name is Fr Frank Bird. I am a Marist Priest of the Society of Mary, and my congregation is a member of Misesan Cara. I have been Director of the Marist Asia Foundation for the past few years, and I am happy to share the experience of our education support for Burmese migrants with this Committee, which I understand is very supportive of education, particularly for the most vulnerable.

We are extremely grateful to Irish Aid (through Misesan Cara) for supporting our Burmese Migrant Secondary Education Programme in Ranong, Southern Thailand, on the Thailand-Myanmar border.

### **Context**

Because of political unrest in Myanmar dating back over 70 years, the Thailand Myanmar Border has 9 Refugee camps in northern Thailand. In the south of Thailand, then, where we are, is a migrant corridor from Kawthaung in Myanmar to Ranong. We have the highest density of Burmese migrants. Many work in fish factories and charcoal factories, construction, and services; the 3-D Migrant Jobs (Dirty, Difficult, Dangerous). An estimated 80% of Burmese migrant children do not get to school. For those who do, 80% leave around age 12. This continues the cycle of poverty for migrant families.

### **Challenges**

Many children do not have identity documents. Poor Burmese migrant parents are desperate to survive and make their children work as soon as their bodies are big enough. Discrimination between Thai and Burmese people causes many restrictions to entry into school in Thailand. Lack of the Thai language causes many students to fall out of Thai schools.

Burmese parents also fear that their children going to Thai schools will cause them to lose their Burmese language and culture. The cost of uniforms, transport, and activities at Thai schools leads a majority of Burmese parents to send their children to Burmese Migrant Learning Centres: these are extremely basic, 'illegal' in the eyes of the Thai Government, and can only manage education for those aged 5-12 years.

To address the problems of access to inclusive quality education, we identified the need to create a Burmese language option, to give access to secondary education, create a quality and recognized curriculum, and promote teacher training pathways.

With the support of Misesan Cara, we built the Marist Centre, which now has 250 students, with a retention rate each year above 85%). We have 20 trained Burmese migrant teachers.

Our Burmese Secondary Education Programme opens access to an Intermediate – Academic English Programme, and then a University Online Diploma Programme. This pathway has had over 50 graduates, educated 20 teachers for us and another 14 for the wider migrant community.

We now have graduates working in the United Nations, World Vision, Save the Children, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Fishing Rights Network and other civil society organisations.

Without secondary education, Burmese migrants could never access higher education or find the roles and voice they have within many organisations that are trying to help migrants solve their problems. Importantly, this is not a scholarship outside the community model; it is, rather, a local training and working model that gives the community role models and inspirational figures to follow.

We have had challenges to get a recognized education pathway in place because we sit between Thailand and Myanmar. Our Burmese Migrant Secondary Education Programme includes 3 languages (Burmese, Thai, English) and is integrated into the Thailand Ministry of Education Non-Formal Education Programme.

Students can finish with us and continue within Thai Non-Formal Upper Secondary Classes on weekends, thereby getting access to Thai local community colleges, online education, and Thai university education pathways.

Young Burmese migrant children - who had previously dropped out of education at age 12 - now ask me how they can study in an Online University to become a teacher or an NGO worker. A new expectation has been set they can now continue their education until 18.

There are some key factors of the Missionary Approach that have helped create and sustain the programme. Missionary Priests and Sisters commit for a good length of time. The vision and leadership remain consistent, and the mainly Buddhist community trusts us as catholic priests and nuns because we do not discriminate, and we care for the most abandoned and the poor. They know this programme is not a quick fix or about handing out money, and that it does not involve a large group of foreigners who will soon move on. This long-term commitment helps build relationships; creates a bond with students, parents, and the authorities.

We want options for sustainable development for the community and work with them for that, not just on a response to an 'emergency' or 'problem' migration event. As missionaries, we can walk in the different worlds and cultures here on the Thailand-Myanmar border: we are seen as bridge-builders and problem solvers, which has helped build trust and collaboration across borders.

But may I quickly share a story about a small Muslim girl called Shwe, which means gold in Burmese language. At 8 years of age, she was in a tin shack with a dirt floor. The teacher used a stick and the floor for the teaching. When police came to arrest the teacher for being 'illegal', she ran into the nearby forest. The children were told always to wait for 1 hour, then go and find the teacher.

Fr John Larsen met Shwe in her home 15 years ago. When asked what she wanted to be in the future, she said: 'I want to be a doctor'.

As a young Muslim woman, she had to leave school early to contribute to the family, working on a bicycle to deliver medicines. She heard of a Marist school that offered education for Burmese migrants. She came to the Marist Centre and became the top student at the ACU Thailand Burma Online Diploma Programme.

Shwe went on to work in Ranong for the International Organisation for Migration (or IOM) as translator and Myanmar – Muslim liaison officer. She is now studying International Development at Rangsit University in Bangkok and is working part-time for the UN office there.

We cannot solve all the problems of international migration, or even all the Burmese migrants' problems on the Thai border, but we can offer them an education so that THEY can solve their problems.

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Misean Cara: Thanks to Fr Frank speaking to the reality, challenges and achievements of the Secondary Education Programme for Burmese Migrants in Thailand.

In terms of policy asks arising for education within Irish development cooperation, Misean Cara proposes that the Foreign Affairs Committee urge Ireland to:

- Increase its support in line with education commitments for state actors and those non-profit, Non-State Actors who support the right to equitable, inclusive and quality education for all; and who help tackle discrimination or disparities in access, educational processes, and outcomes.
- Clarify its approach to Reaching the Furthest Behind First (in education and across the development cooperation programme) in line with the SDGs - for example, with reference to countries' HDI statuses; conflict and post-conflict situations; remote, isolated or marginalised areas; particular at-risk population cohorts; etc.
- As part of its approach to Reaching the Furthest Behind First, expand support (and encourage the EU to do likewise) for the needs of the growing number of forcibly displaced people in the world, through planned support for their inclusion in national education systems; and increasing both development assistance and humanitarian aid provisions to quality education for displaced and host populations.
- Support teachers, school leaders and principals, supervisors and education systems towards greater inclusion in the classroom (of disabled persons, migrants and forcibly displaced people, and girls, for example, as cohorts often at risk of being left behind), through managing diversity; confronting prejudice and discrimination; offering holistic supports to students and families; and investing in the professional development of teachers.