Healthy dose of support still needed for Burma refugees

While there has been some political change in Burma, the changes have not brought about improvement in the lives of refugees from minority ethnic communities.

Burma’s health system still remains grossly underfunded and unable to reach those most in need.

Fighting continues between the Burmese military and ethnic armed groups, especially in Shan State, making it unsafe for already displaced people to return home. The fighting is also displacing more Shan communities with the villagers seeking refuge near the Thai Burma border.

Adding to the hardship of refugee life is the current trend of international funding being shifted away from refugee projects on the Thai Burma border and transferred to new projects inside Burma. This funding shift means that Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA’s work to provide basic health care for refugees along the Thai Burma border is more important than ever.

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA now works with the Shan State Development Foundation (SSDF).

Loi Kaw Wan Clinic
Since 2001, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA has supported a clinic in the Loi Kaw Wan camp located on the Thai Burma border in Thailand’s Chiang Rai province. The clinic, which is staffed by 12 health workers and 6 backpack health workers, provides essential health care for the internally displaced people (IDPs) living in the camp including treating malaria, tuberculosis, HIV, malnutrition, vaccine-preventable diseases, complications of pregnancy and delivery, and respiratory infections.

In 2013-14, the Loi Kaw Wan clinic treated about 3,000 people from the camp, as well as about 2,000 IDPs in the southern parts of Shan State through backpack health worker teams. The clinic’s primary health care is delivered through both in-patient and out-patient facilities, as well as conducting health education in the community, and referring some patients to the district hospital in Thailand’s Chiang Rai Province.

As well as medicine and health staff, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA supports the clinic to provide maternal child health care and nutrition, vaccinations for children, transportation of patients, food for in-patients, the production of materials for health education, and, where necessary, treatment at Thai hospitals and specialist HIV facilities.

The SSDF is building on the legacy of the Shan Health Committee by working to improve delivery of existing health services to ensure that highest level of care can be provided to patients and communities, as well as promoting education to keep communities as healthy as possible, and enabling access to proper sanitation and safe drinking water.

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Paper offerings provide independence in Vietnam

For the past couple of decades Vietnam’s economy has been developing at a rapid rate. Unfortunately, people living with disabilities in Vietnam continue to be excluded from this newfound prosperity.

Vietnam is a country with high numbers of people living with disability, with estimates ranging between 8 and 15 per cent of the population. Less than one third of these people have stable employment or a level of income which would allow them to lead independent lives and support their families.

Disability in Vietnam has many causes including war injuries and the now multi-generational impacts of Agent Orange, workplace injuries, and traffic accidents.

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA works in partnership with local training centres called 8th March Centres, the Department of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (DOLISA), and the Vietnam Federation of Disabilities (VFD) on the ‘Decent Work and Community Empowerment for People with Disabilities’ project in Hai Duong and Quang Nam provinces to build the skills and capacities needed for sustainable employment, so that people living with disabilities are able to take control of their own futures.

Although the Vietnamese government does provide some financial support to people living with disability, the amount is not enough for any form of independent living. With little access to work and a social environment rife with stigma and discrimination, people with disabilities need ways to earn incomes for their families. Like their able-bodied counterparts, they have a right to opportunities to gain meaningful work and to show their communities that they are valuable members of society.

The training courses are designed to be appropriate to people’s abilities and local markets and have included tailoring, carpentry, making paper offerings for religious ceremonies, and information technology. The training has enabled 85% of past graduates to obtain a stable job with incomes ranging from around AU$60 to AU$160 per month. Trainees are also taught job hunting skills and receive training in the law relating to people with disabilities, HIV awareness, and gender equality.

In Hai Duong and Quang Nam provinces the project aims to reduce poverty and isolation and improve social integration for more than 400 people living with disabilities and their families. Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA is also working to expand and strengthen an advocacy network for people living with disabilities at a nation, provincial and district level.

Mrs Chut’s story

Mrs. Nguyen Thi Chut, 44, is from Quang Nam Province. One year ago, Chut was completely dependent on assistance from her parents as she had no opportunity to earn a living while also caring for her primary school aged son. Chut is paraplegic and her husband Phuc has a disability which means he is not able to work or help much with family duties.

Being a women with a disability - but also many abilities - Chut choose to undertake training in making paper offerings as it allowed her to use her hands, eyes and intellect and it also fulfilled a local market need. Paper offerings are used in a variety of religious ceremonies and practices.

An eager student, Chut worked hard and never missed a class during the two month training. Determined to master the art of making the paper offerings, at home Chut would often mentally rehearse how to complete some of the difficult details of the products she was learning in class.

After completing the training, Chut joined a small production group. Each month Chut earns an average of AU$60, but in the month before Vietnamese New Year, she earned nearly AU$160.
Rural teachers in Laos are learning from each other to improve skills

In Laos, unpaid and inexperienced teacher training graduates are often sent to remote and rural locations where they may be the only teacher in the school. With almost 60% of its population under the age of 25, education is a significant issue for the country.

Since 2010, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA has been supporting these teachers to deliver quality education through a partnership with the Pakse Teachers Training College in southern Laos. In 2013, the project was expanded to the Saravan Teacher Training College.

These two training colleges cover four provinces in southern Laos, including some of the poorest districts in the country. The area is overwhelmingly made up of ethnic minority groups, and has some of the worst educational outcomes in the country due to language barriers and remoteness.

Each year in Laos, hundreds of trainee teachers go through a one or two-year teacher training course and are then sent out into rural and remote areas to begin their careers. Many of these teachers are deemed to be ‘non-permanent’ for the first year or two, meaning they receive no salary. They may be the only teacher in their under-resourced village or district school, and are often expected to teach classes with up to 60 students.

Through the teaching colleges, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA assists these new teachers with a resource kit of teaching materials, such as pencils, a dictionary, mini-blackboards and chalk, as well as a 4-day training workshop to help new teachers develop their own peer support networks and share their experiences, tips and strategies of teaching in these challenging situations. An induction booklet has also been developed for newly graduated teachers with approval being sought from the Ministry of Education allow its distribution to teachers around the country.

While a primary school enrolment rate of over 95% shows that Laos is making close to achieving universal primary school attendance, there is a high dropout rate from secondary education. The quality of education is also problematic with almost 27 per cent of young people aged 15-24 illiterate.

**Phonesy’s Story**

Mr Phonesy Phimmasen, 24, was a participant in the new teacher training workshop at Saravan Teacher Training College in July 2013. Phonesy’s parents are farmers and when he finished high school, he could not afford to go to university. Instead he went as a migrant worker to Bangkok, Thailand, where he worked for a greengrocer. After saving money, Phonesy returned to Laos in 2010 and applied to the Saravan Teacher Training College. He was accepted and after one year of training, Phonesy started work at the Talang primary school as a ‘volunteer’.

Phonesy lives with a family in Talang village, and the local village authority provides a rice ration for his daily subsistence. With no salary, he has to catch or produce the rest of his food himself, so Phonesy often has to spend hours fishing after work.

Like other teachers in Laos, Phonesy faced many difficulties when he began work in Talang. He was not familiar with preparing lesson plans, and students had a variety of levels of reading and writing, or were not interested in learning. The school itself is very small and has only one classroom for all the students, and it lacks teaching and learning materials.

Phonesy was very pleased to participate in the workshop. It was his first opportunity to receive training since he graduated and he has pledged to use the new teaching methods he learnt and the induction booklet to increase his teaching skills in the coming semester.
Rural communities preparing for life after Timor’s oil boom

“We don’t have much money, but we do have knowledge ... We’re activists,” says Diogo Maradona Pereira, sitting on the dusty ground under some coconut trees, as he explains the inspiration for his work with Timorese farmers.

Diogo works with Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA partner organisation Knua Buka Hatene (KBH) – a small organisation formed out of the network of Timorese activists whose collective political consciousness was forged in the movement that brought down the Indonesian occupation. According to the Timorese research and advocacy organisation La’o Hamutuk, more than 90% of Timorese state revenue comes from selling of non-renewable oil and gas. This is the revenue that pays for basic services such as schools and hospitals. This is also the revenue from which an ongoing, sustainable, social and economic infrastructure could be built for the future.

There are problems with this situation, beginning with the fact that this “petro state doesn’t have much petrol”. La’o Hamutuk’s analysis projects that even if Australia is forced by public pressure to cede its unlawful claim on Timorese oil fields (www.timorseajustice.com), the state revenue from oil will likely collapse in ten to fifteen years.

Over-reliance on oil and gas often generates a negative economic environment for local production, such as in the agriculture sector. The agricultural sector is where up to 70% of Timorese people draw their income – amongst the poorest people in the world - and it is has not experienced transformative growth in the fragile post independence economy.

KBH is one part of a network of progressive Timorese activists working on sustainable, just, rural development. Over the last 12 months, KBH’s efforts have focussed on injecting expertise, investment and social infrastructure into the agriculture sector.

Organised through a network of five rural Community Learning Centres, specialist trainers, like Diogo, have been supporting communities working in rural Timor to boost their production using economically and environmentally sustainable farming techniques. Often this involves small scale infrastructure investment, such as chicken wire, seeds and water tanks, as well as skills training.

In 2013-14, KBH’s rural programs have expanded and experienced new levels of success, including the establishment of a collectively owned and managed papaya plantation, training 3 farmer’s cooperatives in organic fertiliser and pesticide production, and five cooperatives in collective financial management.

Over the coming year, KBH will build on the growing strength of its rural projects initiating two new farming projects in rural Timor, and a demonstration plot in the capital, Dili. APHEDA will continue to support KBH’s work to develop a stronger economic base for Timorese farmers.

For further reading on Timorese political economy visit www.laohamutuk.org
Progress for most marginalised Cambodian entertainment workers

In Cambodia’s entertainment industry, young women working as beer promoters and hostesses in bars or karaoke halls often work in difficult and physically dangerous conditions. Sexual harassment and the consumption of large quantities of alcohol occurs daily. Accordingly, occupational health and safety training looks a bit different for the young women workers in this industry - What do you do if a customer becomes violent? How much can you drink safely?

Since 2007, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA has worked with the Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation (CFSWF) to improve the lives of beer promotion workers and other entertainment workers.

The project started after the 2006 visit to Cambodia by the then ACTU President, Sharan Burrow. The trip was designed to highlight the appalling conditions of the women workers who were selling international brands of beer in Cambodia’s restaurants, bars and beer gardens.

Beer promotion workers are exposed daily to occupational hazards such as alarmingly high rates of physical harassment in the workplace, including unwanted sexual touching and coerced sex. The women often come from rural areas and many are illiterate or have little education. To earn a living they are expected to drink with their clients to earn tips, often drinking to intoxication. Beer promotion involves a lot of night shifts and travel to and from work during unsociable hours. Low base salaries and a lack of job security can lead to an acceptance of harassment, pressure to drink, and sometimes to informal sex work to support themselves and their families.

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA continues to support CFSWF’s efforts to unionise entertainment workers, raise awareness of workers’ rights to a safe and healthy workplace, raise awareness about freedom of association and basic labour rights, build solidarity among beer promotion workers and advocate for decent work. Since 2007, several hundred beer promotion workers have participated in the project, with worker-led actions leading to improvements in conditions. Base salaries have increased from around US$60 per month to around US$100. This wage is still below the US$120 that the Cambodian government recently declared to be the ‘poverty line’, and is well below the living wage of US$177 that Cambodian unions and community groups are currently campaigning for.

In other cases, employers have been obliged to address OHS issues and to provide conditions such as annual and maternity leave. However, with poor overall protection for workers, it is often a case of one step forward and two steps back. Some employers started to only offer short 6-month contracts for new employees, and when beer promotion workers won an order for backpay of penalty rates for work previously performed on Sundays, the company involved reacted by prohibiting workers from working at all on Sundays to prevent them from earning the overtime rate.

Until now, entertainment workers have been so marginalised that the labour law did not even apply to them. Any gains won were the result of the collective efforts and power of the CFSWF members.

With support from Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA, the CFSWF has won new laws giving its members the same rights as other workers, including access to new OHS regulations. The new laws were announced in October 2014 and will give entertainment workers a new tool with which to continue the struggle for decent working conditions.
Millions of people in South Africa continue to be affected by the apartheid legacy of rural underdevelopment and poverty. Sustainable agriculture is key to improving lives in the countryside.

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA partner organisation the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) is taking on the challenge of rural poverty with an empowering pro-poor approach based on developing self-employment opportunities and small-scale agricultural production that can sustain entire families.

Established in 1983, TCOE seeks to contribute to the transformation of the countryside through the building of an independent mass movement of the rural poor — made up of small farmers, land rights forums, producer cooperatives, small stock-holders and rural women’s groups — who are capable of articulating and advocating for their own interests.

TCOE is working with more than 70 groups of poor farmers in 6 rural areas with a combined membership of over 2,500 people. The main objective is to increase small farmer production through skills training, improving access to land, water, inputs, education and local markets, and advocacy for democratic governance and healthy public policy. TCOE also promotes the establishment of household gardens wherever possible.

The food grown by the groups comprises mainly of vegetables such as spinach, potatoes, and cabbage. Most of the food grown is for consumption by the families of members of the groups, but where there is an excess of food it is sold at local markets to generate income. There are also several groups that own a few goats, sheep or small herds of cattle. TCOE will be establishing a stock-farmers association that is capable of producing milk and meat for the local market.

To increase the sustainability of the agricultural projects, TCOE is integrating ‘agro-ecological’ farming techniques into its training. These farming methods — such as the use of indigenous plants and seeds, and water conservation and harvesting techniques — are less reliant on expensive commercial seeds and chemicals and actually help to restore and rebuild soil quality.

After receiving training, farmers have started seed-saving programs and are looking to preserve local varieties of plants and seeds and the history of seed use in their villages and towns. This will increase the knowledge of indigenous agricultural practice.

In 2013-14, TCOE organised two farming field schools with technical advice from small-farmers in Zimbabwe and Brazil, and established four community plant nurseries which are run by local committees. As well as building the farming skills of the rural poor, the field schools produce information pamphlets and fact sheets in local languages to ensure that information is accessible to the local communities.

In 2014-15, TCOE is also helping build women’s groups in the more than 350 villages in which it works. It aims to train at least 50 women to be local leaders who will be able to monitor local government policy and practice in relation to land use. TCOE is also developing a leadership program to tackle the social problems of HIV, substance abuse and domestic violence.
The influx of people seeking refuge from the ongoing civil war in Syria is adding to the challenges faced by the Palestinian refugees who have been living in Lebanon for the last 65 years.

Over those years, the situation for the Palestinians who fled violence or were forced from their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war has deteriorated, with severely limited access to health services, education, or meaningful employment.

Palestinians in Lebanon are prohibited from working in more than 70 professions and, with few other options, are forced to work in the informal economy where exploitation of wages and conditions is common. Educational opportunities are restricted for Palestinian children in the camps who are not permitted to attend mainstream Lebanese schools, instead attending schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). According to UNRWA, 10% of Palestinians over the age of 15 have never attended any form of schooling and the school drop-out rate for children aged 14-15 years is 50%.

These education and employment challenges have been exacerbated by the current influx of Syrian refugees, with over 40,000 Syrian refugees moving into the already over-crowded and under-funded Palestinian refugee camps. The population of the Bourj Al-Barajneh camp, in the southern suburbs of Beirut, has swelled by 29% since the start of the Syria conflict.

Despite the increasingly challenging situation, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA’s partner organisation, the Palestinian Women’s Humanitarian Organisation (PWHO), has been helping to support the newly arrived Palestinian-Syrian refugees move into the camp with funds from the APHEDA 2013 Syria Emergency Appeal. PWHO has provided families with food parcels, emergency clothing and bedding, infant care kits and women’s hygiene kits.

As well as emergency support, newly arrived refugee children have been able to access education through PWHO’s Early Education Centre. Over 120 children aged 3-8 years-old attend the centre where they study basic literacy and numeracy in Arabic and English. The curriculum also includes activities that promote the psychological wellbeing of children and their families, especially those who have been exposed to high levels of violence.

PWHO also works with women and mothers in the camp through their Women and Family Centre. This centre provides rights-based training workshops, job-skills training, trips outside the camp, and female health services. The family centre is also used as a way of engaging with women who do not send their children to the education centre, but are still in need of psychological or other support.

Refugee children showing fear reactions
As the Syrian civil war continues with no resolution in sight, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA and PWHO are working to better understand the long term impact of the conflict on the psychological health of children in the camp.

PWHO staff have reported increased instances of children showing physical reactions that are often associated with fear, such as vomiting, shivering, rapid heart rate and unexplained crying. Over the next 12 months, PWHO will conduct a study in the Bourj Al-Barajneh community to identify children’s fears and concerns and the impact of that anxiety on their daily lives.

The results of this study will enable PWHO to better target their holistic care approach for families in the camp and prepare materials that support children’s psychological health and wellbeing.
Defending diminishing workers’ rights in Fiji

The censorship of local media in the lead up to the 2014 Fijian election added to the challenge of getting messages out about the workers’ and human rights situation in the country.

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA partner organisation the Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) works in a very difficult political climate. Since 2011, Fijian workers and their unions have been living under the Essential National Industries Decree (ENI) which made all existing collective agreements void and made strikes, protests or other “financially harmful activities” illegal and punishable by up to 5 years imprisonment. Trade unions were also required to re-register and the election of trade union representatives made subject to government approval.

As well as the ENI, the 2012 Media Decree restricted local media organisations from publishing statements purported to “threaten national security.”

This climate of media censorship and repression means that the communications officer position at the FTUC supported by Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA is very important to get messages out to workers in Fiji and internationally about the human and workers’ rights situation. The FTUC regularly distributes press releases, information on workshops conducted by FTUC and its affiliates, articles on special events relevant to workers issues, images of workshops and other relevant public events, and information from international meetings and from global labour movements.

The Media Decree is a major obstacle to local media coverage of FTUC statements and media releases. It has meant that FTUC has had to look to less traditional methods of getting its messages out like social media networks and blogs. FTUC statements have been distributed via FTUC’s own website and Facebook page and have been covered by international media groups and local web blogs. A number of international web blogs such as Fiji coupfourpointfive (coup5.com), fijitoday.wordpress.com, and fijileaks.com have published FTUC press releases despite the Media Decree preventing local publication.

Post-election outlook

The election on 17 September 2014 saw the party of military coup leader Voreqe ‘Frank’ Bainimarama obtain 59% of the vote in what was the first election since the 2006 coup. While five opposition parties said they did not accept the result due to voting irregularities, international observers said the result “broadly reflected” the will of voters.

Fiji was recently rated by the International Trade Union Congress’s Global Rights Index as one of the world’s worst violators of workers’ rights, and the attacks on workers’ rights and unions are expected to continue post-election. Earlier this year, FTUC came out strongly against Fiji’s new National Minimum Wage which was set at only $2 per hour.

You can follow the FTUC on facebook at www.facebook.com/FTUC1

Media censorship in Fiji has forced unions to use less traditional methods of communicating with union members and the Fijian public, including facebook and internet blogs.