

## Grassroots Community Project for Ethnic Youth Leaders in Myanmar

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**Introduction:** Ethnic conflicts and violence contribute to the economic and political hardship of Myanmar<sup>1</sup>, a country that was under military dictatorship for half a century. Due to inefficient policies and ongoing political conflicts between ethnic and government armed forces, there is an increasing gap in education and economic opportunities between the majority Burmese and ethnic minorities. Myanmar's democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi pointed out in her speech in Westminster to the UK parliament:

“In 2008, the military drew up a constitution – but it must be amended to incorporate the basic rights and aspirations of [Myanmar's] ethnic nationalities... (In closing) This is the most important time for [Myanmar]. This is the moment of our greatest need.”

One best way to narrow the opportunity gap and relieve the frustrations of ethnic nationalities is to help grow community leaders of ethnic origins. This program will offer a comprehensive training program and mentorship to help economically disadvantaged ethnic youth with strong interests in initiating community development projects. This will increase the educational and economic opportunities as well as address the frustrations of ethnic communities the program graduates will be serving. My inspiration for this project is born out of a sense of responsibility as one of the handful Myanmar nationals who is fortunate to receive a liberal education in a great college in the US.

**Background:** The Myanmar educational system - from elementary to college - determines students' performance through examinations that test their ability to memorize texts. This hinders critical thinking, teamwork, ability to challenge doctrines, leadership skills and initiation skills. Since college graduates learn through rote memorization, most graduates have similar opportunities as high school graduates with pays as low as \$50 a month. While some students from higher financial and social background rely on educational resources from private institutions to improve their qualifications, these resources are out of reach for most ethnic students.

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<sup>1</sup> Myanmar has 55 million population consisting of over 135 ethnic groups with eight major ethnic nationalities: *Kachin, Kayar, Kayin, Chin, Bama (Burmese), Mon, Rakhine, and Shan*. Burmese people consists of the majority of the population approximately 68% and thus is a dominant group in the country. About 25% of the population is made up of the various ethnic nationalities and the rest 7% is made up of Chinese and Indian population.

**Project Design:** This project will help seven to nine ethnic students in Myanmar who have strong interests in initiating community projects to gain leadership, critical thinking, and communication skills to be able to carry out their dream projects. Selection criteria will be students' inspiration to become high achievers and dedication to contribute back to their home communities through initiating community projects. A three-month comprehensive program during the summer 2013, followed by year-long mentorship and one month refresher courses between December 20 of 2013 and January 20 of 2014, will help the selected ethnic students to become well-rounded and respected community leaders. This will be achieved through grant writing and volunteer management workshops by experts in the non-profit field, guest speakers, English skills training, library visits, and Touchstones discussions<sup>2</sup> – important components of good leadership that Myanmar education fails to provide.

Applicants will be required to submit a proposal for a community project that they want to carry out between September 2013 and April 2014. Successful applicants will be given small grants every few months for their projects depending on their performance and success of their projects. A student associate with strong leadership skills and an interest for community service will be hired to monitor the program graduates' performance in their respective projects and to report back to me through weekly written reports and Skype meetings. I understand that managing from a distance is challenging from my experiences of managing the local associates of CONNECT Myanmar<sup>3</sup> from the US but it has been successful for some carefully-selected motivated associates who are hopeful for the experience, monthly salary, and recommendation. I will go back to Myanmar during the winter break between December 20 of 2013 and January 20 of 2014 to give refresher courses and consult the program graduates with the successes and challenges with their respective community projects. This project will take place in *Pyin Nya Theit Pan* Monastic School in Yangon. Advertising and publicity for the project will start in April by CONNECT Myanmar local team. The main part of this comprehensive program will include the following:

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<sup>2</sup> "Touchstones is a registered educational not-for-profit organization dedicated to bringing the world together through dialogue. Through the Touchstones discussion process, all participants engage in respectful collaboration that fosters essential communication and literacy skills, critical thinking skills, responsibility, community, and shared leadership." (www.touchstones.org)

<sup>3</sup> CONNECT Myanmar is a social enterprise I co-founded in summer 2012. CONNECT Myanmar promotes awareness of internship to Myanmar youth and local businesses through seminars and workshops and have a network with hundreds of local youth.

1. *Grant Writing and Volunteer Management Workshops* will be held twice a week by experts in the non-profit and community service area. These kinds of workshops are not readily available in Myanmar and will be very valuable for the ethnic student leaders and the community projects they will be initiating. Tentative teachers for the workshops include my internship mentor from Myanmar Egress<sup>4</sup> Capacity Development Center and an American VIA (Volunteers in Asia) teacher who has been working as an internship and service coordinator in PCP<sup>5</sup> Myanmar, the program that helped me prepare for an admission to Scripps College.

2. *Guest Speakers* from various non-profit organizations and fields will be invited once a week because Myanmar education does not offer interaction with guest speakers. Guest speakers invited include my mentor and head of English Department in Myanmar Egress and professionals from various fields who were panel discussion leaders in a CONNECT Myanmar seminar I organized last summer. Other guest speakers will be students who have community service experiences either in Myanmar or in the U.S. These guest speakers will include students who are returning for the summer break from their current studies in the U.S. Through interaction with guest speakers, ethnic students will not only learn the skills they need to succeed in their community projects but also come up with new ideas for projects they have not thought of before that will benefit their various communities. Two board members from CONNECT Myanmar team who are studying in Grinnell College and Northwestern University are enthusiastic to manage this project with me including guest speakers program, library visits, and Touchstones Discussions.

3. *English Language Skills Training*: Students will be given English skills training once a week to help them expand their opportunities for networks and grant applications beyond local NGOs and grants available locally. An English teacher will be hired. I have found interested English teachers from Myanmar Egress and EduMap Language Center where I have interned and worked respectively.

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<sup>4</sup> “The Myanmar Egress is a non-profit Organization founded by Myanmar scholars and social workers who have been actively involved in various civil society.” ([www.myanmaregress.org](http://www.myanmaregress.org))

<sup>5</sup> PCP stands for Pre-Collegiate Program of the Diplomatic School, Yangon, Myanmar. “[PCP’s] aims are to prepare [12 to 18] carefully selected students to thrive at colleges abroad while earning bachelors’ degrees and to assist them to begin their careers back home, serving and leading in different walks of life.” (Profile of PCP)

4. *Weekly Library Visits* will take place once a week to the Baldwin Library, the cultural branch of the American Embassy, where students will be enrolled for library membership. This is a very important step because many students from non-urban middle class with limited English skills are either uninformed or discouraged to visit the library and to join its students clubs. Every week, students will have an opportunity to visit the library and join its associated students' clubs such as Debate Club and Public Speaking Club.

5. *Touchstones Discussions* will be held once a week to help improve students' communication skills and ability to express themselves through collaborative discussions that Myanmar education does not offer. Visits to the weekly Touchstones Discussion hosted by PCP will also be made to let the students get in touch with a diverse group of students. These visits would not have been possible without this project because ethnic students are hesitant to visit these discussions where most students are Burmese and Chinese urban upper middle class students with polished English skills. These discussions will help ethnic students go beyond rote memorization of the texts and broaden the visions for their personal life as well as for the community projects they will be leading.

**Project Impact:** This project is a crucial step to help ethnic students with broad visions to initiate, both through formal community projects and non-formal interactions, a circle of high achieving ethnic nationalities in their communities. The seed of human capacity this project will have grown in these ethnic student leaders will bring ripple effects to more leaders in their communities. Therefore, this project is key to narrowing the opportunity gap between Burmese and ethnic nationalities. This project is in fact a grassroots project in the micro level for the macro vision of Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar people to reduce the frustrations of ethnic nationalities through "incorporating the basic rights and aspirations of ethnic nationalities."

**Personal Qualifications:** I am a junior year Economics major student at Scripps College with strong interest in educational social work. I am currently tutoring Mathematics in Scripps College. In summer 2012, I was awarded a Johnson Research Grant by Scripps College to investigate "Financial Literacy of Myanmar College Students" in Yangon. I have been directing a series of internship seminars and workshops as the head of CONNECT Myanmar. I am a native speaker of Burmese and received my Bachelor's degree in English from Yangon University of Foreign Languages in Myanmar in 2008.

Stipends for teachers and student leaders for the three-month comprehensive training	\$600 * 2 teachers, 2 CONNECT board members and me	= \$3,000
Year-long compensation for the associate to monitor and support program graduates with their respective projects	\$250 * 8 months	= \$2,000
Stipends for program graduates' projects	\$200 * 8 students	= \$1,600
Transportation costs	\$35 * 10 library visits	= \$350
	\$35 * 10 Touchstones Discussion visits to PCP	= \$350
Books and supplies (English and Touchstones books) and transportation grants for students	\$200 * 8 students	= \$1,600
Thank You gifts for guest speakers	\$30 * 10 guest speakers	= \$300
Donation to <i>Pyin Nya Theit Pan</i> Monastic School for the use of venue	\$700 * 1 time	= \$700
		<b>Total = \$9,900</b>