NAMATI
INNOVATIONS IN LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

Network Member Spotlight

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NETWORK MEMBER: KARENNI SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE (SDC)

Battling Injustice with Pens, Paper and Classrooms

The **Karenni Social Development Centre (SDC)** works to protect the environment in rural Eastern Myanmar and promote the human rights of the Karenni people - in Myanmar and in refugee camps in Thailand. It teaches students non-violent skills to help build a new society and to develop the rule of law in Myanmar.

Founded 2002

sdcthailand.wordpress.com

Karenni students are given training in human rights and environmental activism that takes a non-violent approach.

Khu Klaw Reh is the son of poor farmers in Kayah State, in wild and rural eastern Mynamar. His family could not afford school fees until he was eight years old, but being bright and keen to learn, eventually he secured a place in a local Catholic boarding school.

But Khu Klaw Reh is one of the Karenni people - also known as the 'Red Karen'. His thirst for education came with a high cost.

A government soldier, suspicious of him for leaving his village of Pukaraku, near Hpruso in the north west of the state, accused Khu of being a Karen rebel - and had him arrested, interrogated, and threatened with violence. The Karenni have been in conflict with the Burmese state since independence in 1948 - having experienced and been promised forms of sovereignty at various times in their history. They have suffered, and continue to suffer, particularly badly at the hands of Myanmar's military.

Khu Klaw Reh was forced to flee his village in 2004 and made his way to a refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border. Once safe, he had trouble imagining how to remedy the kinds of injustice he and his people routinely faced. "People were always saying 'democracy, democracy,'" he says, "but what it meant I did not know."

It was to answer questions such as these that the Karenni Social Development Centre (SDC) was founded in the camps on the Thai-Myanmar border in 2002 - its main tools being pens, pencils, books, and a makeshift classroom. The SDC school in Refugee Camp Number 1 is the Karenni's response to an ongoing human rights struggle. During the

decades-long rule of the oppressive and abusive Burmese military regime, an estimated 200,000 members of the Karenni were driven from their homes in Eastern Myanmar. The area has suffered greatly from rampant resource exploitation and land-grabbing by the Burmese military.

Over 22,000 Karenni people have fled to Thailand, where they live in two refugee camps in Mae Hong Son province. Though there are many young people in the camps, schooling ends at around age 15. Few can access further education. Against this background, SDC was created to teach future potential leaders of the Karenni, like Khu Klaw Reh, about their rights.

So far SDC has trained over 290 students to become human rights and environmental activists. The SDC school principal, Khu Myar Reh, sees this work as "building the capacity of the Karenni community to identify and challenge violations of their environmental and human rights." He is equipping community members to take charge of their future while living under legal constraints.

Though SDC students may initially lack the vocabulary and skills to work as social activists, they bring to the classroom a direct awareness of the political struggle. Many have suffered human rights abuses, had their family land stolen, or been affected by environmental destruction. They have witnessed violence, and in some cases experienced it directly. Given this background, these students want to learn about human rights and non-violent methods of social change, and they desperately want to share this knowledge with their communities.

"Honestly, before attending this course I didn't know anything about human rights," says Nga Meh, who grew up in the Karenni refugee camps and studied at SDC. "After attending this course I have learnt a lot about this subject. If people like me become lawyers, this will be very beneficial to building a peaceful future." She currently serves as an office worker for Karenni education, and expects to do even more for her community. "I am now trying to improve myself every day," she says.

Not all of the legal problems the Karenni exiles face are external. The refugee camps, like so many around the globe, breed problems related to powerlessness: domestic violence, divorce and family law problems, property claims and refugee-on-refugee assaults. The camps have also suffered a brain-drain – many of the best-educated have resettled to other countries, and community judges had little experience of human rights.

SDC decided to tackle this issue head-on, by having students research and write yearly reports on the camps' legal system, having them compare their reports with other human rights situations, and organize trainings for local judges. The students set up a Moot Court, to gain hands-on experience with all sides of a legal situation, and organized a human rights day celebration to share legal awareness with all members of the community.

According to SDC, citizens have become more satisfied with the camps' legal system, and at least eight former SDC students have served as judges. Other former students are serving as teachers, directors of vocational training, and human rights monitors.

Because the organization is unregistered and situated in a refugee camp, it faces particular challenges. On the Thai side of the border, members of the Karenni community are deemed illegal migrants, unrecognized as refugees. As such, their movements are heavily restricted. "We cannot go everywhere we wish," the principal, Khu, says, "and we cannot do the things we would like to implement easily or properly."

Nevertheless, he is optimistic about the project's continued success: "I strongly believe that by providing an education in human rights, environment, the rule of law and democracy, many people have better knowledge of their own rights and understand how to respect others' rights. The judicial system practiced by our community in

the camp is better, fairer and more effective. Also, today more and more members of our community are aware of how to protect and maintain the environment."

The education delivered by SDC is designed to reverberate well beyond the classroom. This past year, a group of SDC alumni created the Peace Initiative Program, with the goal of helping students and disadvantaged youth engage more directly with the democratic process. Their first two workshops focused on drug and alcohol awareness, and equipped participants with the knowledge to teach their families about the dangers of addiction – another issue faced by long-term refugees.

SDC students are being taught the basic definition of "democracy," but also given the tools to negotiate for fairer treatment in everyday interactions, and—they hope eventually—on the national level.

Key Lessons

1. Education arouses interest: People struggling for their lives did not have much interest in legal-political issues. However, after conducting trainings and workshops in Karenni State, many young people and women became more interested in justice issues inside the country.

2. Collaboration is key 1: Every year SDC recruits more students and continually plans to implement more mobile trainings, workshops and campaigns inside Burma. However, SDC is an unregistered organization in Myanmar and when it conducts trainings or workshops, the military and Myanmar authorities interrupt its activities. For this reason, SDC is collaborating more with Myanmar CBOs and organizations to implement its projects without hinderance.

3. Collaboration is key 2: SDC is also trying to communicate and collaborate with more and more organizations that are related to human rights, environment and law. This is to accumulate more experience and knowledge from others and be able to apply these skills to change to a genuine democratic government system and maintain the rule of law in Burma.

4. Staff sustainability is crucial: SDC has replaced brought-in trainers with long-term volunteers with the necessary skills. And in the last two years, our training course has run much more smoothly. It has allowed our staff more time to prepare their lessons and it has allowed us to continually expand our SDC course and increase the benefits for our students.