

# **The Politics of Social Entrepreneurs in Access to Education: A Case Study of Shan Burmese Refugees in Northwestern Thailand**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines social entrepreneurship in a Burmese refugee community as it strives to provide primary education to its children[1]. Despite facing discrimination and fearing Thai authorities, our project leaders exemplified social entrepreneurship, most notably building social capital and agency within the refugee community, and surprisingly resolving intractable problems. Key processes included helping parents claim ownership of the program, depoliticizing the children's access to education, and encouraging high expectations of school performance. Social relationships built an internally sustainable project at virtually no cost and established bridges across antipathetic parties. We argue that the social entrepreneurship model is useful in contexts where poor communities cannot access non-governmental organizations or government agencies.

## **Introduction**

The Shan are an ethnic group persecuted by the national government in Burma (Myanmar). The Burmese government, now ruled by the military State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) dictatorship, has banned the Shan language from all public institutions, pitted Shan against other ethnic minorities to forestall organized dissent, and captured many Shan as forced labor for the national army (Karen Human Rights Group, 2000). By some estimates, there are hundreds of thousands of ethnic Shan displaced from Burma (Win, 2001) who form communities in the mountains of northwestern Thailand. Most of these displaced persons earn barely sustainable wages (Human Rights Watch, 1998).

Despite consistent reports of human rights abuses against Shan in Burma (Shan Human Rights Foundation, 1998; Mirante, 1989), the Thai government claims that most Shan leave Burma for purely economic reasons (Khuenkaew, 2001). The Thai government does not abide by United Nations regulations regarding refugees, since it never signed on to the 1951 Refugee Convention. It has openly ordered the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to stop processing applications for refugee status in Thailand (Martin, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 1998). The Thai government fears that official recognition of the Shan refugee crises would result in an uncontrollable refugee situation (Hynd, 2002). Limits on immigration are also needed to prevent drug trafficking, unsustainable population growth, and damage to economic and political ties with Burma (Macan-Markar, 2003; Son & Poonyarat, 2002).

In truth, the government allows most Shan Burmese refugees who pay for their work permits to stay. Rights officially associated with these work permits, however, are rarely known by the Shan or protected by Thai officials (Martin, 2005; Martin, 2004). Rather, work permits serve primarily to protect employers ensuring them workers if there is an immigration raid. Permits are costly, with renewable annual fees of approximately \$100. Since some households earn an average of \$1-2 a day, the permits impose a formidable burden. In contrast, the minimum wage for a Thai worker in the northwestern provinces is approximately \$5-6 a day (Bank of Thailand, 2005).

Families without work permits fear discovery by Thai government officials or locals. Many such families resort to bribing officials to escape "police detection" (Wong, 2001), and are sometimes not paid for their work since they have no recourse for complaint. Because they wish to remain in Thailand, the refugees accept whatever work they are given, even if a job compromises their health. Prolonged exposure to polluted water and unprotected application of pesticides are common hazards they face.

The Shan appear to be tolerated by the Thai populace, partly because they provide cheap labor (Sparkes, 1995). Still, some Thais may regard them as "illegitimate" foreigners. Moreover, their low income results in de facto marginalization from their Thai neighbors. The Shan refugees might be trapped in subordinate roles because some Thai nationals resent their transcendence (i.e., by pursuing their own businesses in the informal sector) (Human Rights Watch, 1998; Karen Human Rights Group, 2000). Nevertheless, the Shan may have an easier time assimilating into Thai society than other Burmese minorities because they are considered "ethnic cousins" of the Thai; they practice Theravada Buddhism, and their languages are related (Wansai, 2005). Although 90% of the adult refugees receive no formal education in Burma and only a handful can read or write, almost all of them recognize that education would help their children thrive economically. While Thai laws technically allow Shan children to attend Thai schools, parents are unfamiliar with the bureaucracy, do not speak Thai well, and cannot afford books or school uniforms (Ruiz, 2002).

Formal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are reluctant to provide services to this population, and local politics are extremely volatile. Therefore, because no top-down formula can be implemented in a sustainable way, innovative social entrepreneurship models are needed to address the obstacles faced by the Shan. In this paper, we use quantitative and qualitative data collected from a community of Shan refugees in Thailand to demonstrate that social entrepreneurship provides a useful model for addressing gaps that traditional NGOs and aid agencies do not fill. In this case study, we study how the disparate Shan and Thai communities united via innovative social entrepreneurship on the part of Thai project leaders.

### **Social Entrepreneurship**

Fowler (2000) employs a very narrow characterization of social entrepreneurs by only considering projects where financial profit can help social entrepreneurs raise money to work towards a social goal. Economics plays prominently in his definition of social entrepreneurship as "the creation of viable [socio-] economic structures, relations,

institutions, organizations and practices that yield and sustain social benefits" (p. 649). He contends that the social entrepreneurship model is "less sensitive to loss in public trust," or loss of support from the local community, because it centers on commercial enterprises that prioritize market forces more than local social relations. Fowler contrasts this with a model of "civic innovation," whereby existing conventions and institutions are remolded for civic benefit via "on-going, self-willed citizen engagement and support" (p. 649). In contrast, we primarily draw from Dees (1998, 2003), who maintains that the following conditions are present in social entrepreneurship:

adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value); recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission; engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning; acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand; and exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created" (1998, p. 4).

Dees is careful to emphasize that social entrepreneurs do not necessarily engage in commercial enterprises in their pursuit of social goals. In this paper, we agree that social entrepreneurship emphasizes creativity, flexibility, and collective work to accomplish community goals.

We argue that the social entrepreneurship model should be broad enough to include non-commercial enterprises and key elements of the civic innovation model; that its very strength and flexibility stem from a reliance on local social relations and trust-building, without which little can be accomplished without financial resources such as development aid or market profit. In our case study, Shan Burmese refugees had little access to financial aid or capital in Thailand, but they managed to gain access to education by focusing on social relations and fostering public good in their means as well as their ends.

### **Methodology**

We obtained descriptive information on the sociodemographics, education, and health of all refugee households using a census form translated into Shan. A local Shan schoolteacher collected data via door-to-door interviews, ensuring inclusion of all houses within the community. In addition, the authors spent between one and two months a year for four years between 2001-2005 conducting open-ended interviews with the project directors (our "social entrepreneurs") and community members. These data were consistent with the data collected at the time of the original census. The schools collected height and weight, and recorded behavioral and academic performance at the end of each semester in student logbooks. Data from these logbooks were collected and tabulated annually. Where data were missing, the project directors obtained height and weight of the children in the community themselves.

Qualitative data were collected via direct observation, interviews with approximately 30 households, and repeated question sessions between the project leaders and community members. To respect confidentiality, this paper uses pseudonyms of interviewees. The authors helped with fundraising for project operations and provided advice, but were not directly involved in day-to-day operations or the collection of data. While the researchers' financial involvement in the project could bias the reporting of project

outcomes in some settings, our objective is to relate a model of social entrepreneurship that formed naturally and produced clear outcomes.

### **Project History**

At the project's 2001 inception, a local Thai national, Yai, volunteered to teach Shan children for two hours each day. Classes took place in a small thatch-roofed hut with logs laid sideways as tables. Start-up costs were negligible since the space was available, classroom materials were donated, and Yai himself did not have full-time employment. Yai focused on his teaching responsibilities full-time, garnering school supplies and constructing lessons outside of classroom hours. He was supported by Noi, who ran a small cooking business out of their home. Some of the Shan refugees contributed time for school help and pooled financial resources for notebooks and school supplies. In keeping with a social entrepreneurship model, Yai and Noi's project reflected high levels of effectiveness in working together with the Shan community to provide an education for their children; they created a resource worthy of investment.

This school operated for two years, and most Shan children in the area attended. Although the number of children in the vicinity varied due to migration fluctuations, there were always between 35 and 46 children in this informal school. The students in the classroom were between 4 and 14 years of age. Because all children were taught at the same time, younger students were able to learn more advanced math skills, while the older students were often instructed well below age-appropriate levels. While the beginning pupils practiced writing the alphabet, the most advanced students practiced reading by themselves.

Yai and Noi demonstrated qualities of social entrepreneurship by focusing on routine structured activities, trust-building and cultural respect rather than financial costs of running a school. They accomplished this by engaging in conversations on what a school meant to the families, and what the children expected, rather than imposing set projects, curricula, or programs. Yai and Noi built social capital by encouraging the children to study in groups outside of class, with more advanced children helping the relative newcomers. By the end of the two years, all students attending the school were reading and writing Thai. Non-compulsory attendance among these local Shan refugee children was near 100%. We do not mean to infer that up-to-date school materials are not important, or that the dignity that comes with a positive, well-supplied, school is insignificant. Rather, we highlight Yai and Noi's willingness to move forward, running an informal school despite obstacles.

The school and Yai acted as social linkages between the refugees and the greater Thai community. The school lent the Shan legitimacy in the eyes of Thai locals. It was significant that all of the children from the four clusters of refugees we studied attended the school every day; this convinced local Thais that the Shan refugees had collective rather than merely individual needs. By the same token, the informal school helped to convert primary education into a public concern, potentially protecting the refugee families from local officials by eliciting the sympathy of the greater Thai community. Yai's knowledge of Thai customs and laws, coupled with the Thai community's support of the children's education, created new opportunities for innovation. Locals even sent their own children to Yai's school during the summers. This exemplifies how the social

entrepreneurship model paid off, as the refugee children attained literacy and made unprecedented connections with Thai children.

While the school linked Shan refugees with their Thai neighbors, garnering the district government's support along the way, it remained endangered. Its overt operations risked attracting attention from the larger provincial government located in a nearby town. The fear of discovery prompted the district government to close the school after two years of operation. Yai and Noi, by that point epitomizing social entrepreneurship so well that their "reach exceed[ed] their grasp" (Dees, 2001, p. 2), then faced a new challenge in facilitating primary education access. Rather than acquiesce to defeat, they sought new opportunities to ensure schooling for Shan refugees.

### **The Dividends of Social Entrepreneurship**

Yai and Noi assessed what the community did possess: 1) a body of children eager to learn who were now proficient in Thai, and 2) a trusting group of parents willing to contribute whatever they could to their children's learning. Further, they saw a political opportunity in the fact that Thai laws do not technically prohibit Shan children from attending Thai schools. Yai and Noi therefore went to each local Thai primary school to assess capacities. They found that classrooms did indeed have empty seats, and that local teachers (moved by the children's struggle to learn) would be willing to admit Shan children into their classrooms provided that they purchased mandatory school uniforms and books. In keeping with social entrepreneurship principles, the education gap was not filled by formulating a new policy per se, but by bridging existing norms in civil society and innovatively working with existing policies and resources. The fact that teachers were sympathetic highlights the notion that government was not monolithic, and Yai and Noi did not see it as such. Therefore, they were able to work with public school teachers to leap a barrier erected by other public officials.

Signs of sustainable social value began to emerge. For instance, little by little, it appears that the children themselves took on the school-training roles of Yai and Noi. During one visit to household clusters, Noi met new Burmese arrivals who had heard all about this place called "school". The children were eager to participate, and had started to learn basic Thai phrases by playing "student" as other children played "teacher" (Personal communication, February 2004). This is evidence of the enduring social capital that was built not only among adults in the community, but also among children.

A few barriers nonetheless remained. Though the children learned to speak Thai without an accent, they were still easy to identify because they were undernourished. Their precarious health status also made learning difficult. The next priority, then, was to dig latrines in each of the communities and to repair or build wells and water pumps to reduce the incidence of diarrhea. Children were vaccinated and provided with deworming pills to eliminate intestinal parasites. They were also given vitamins to address micronutrient malnutrition, which in turn improved their school performance. These public health interventions epitomize how social entrepreneurs draw upon existing (sometimes surprising) resources. They also highlight the idea that social entrepreneurs do not operate in centralized ways, via pre-programmed agendas. Rather, needs and capacities are frequently reevaluated, and creative solutions present themselves alongside the emergence of new problems.

Avoiding sense of dependency within the community was paramount. Yai and Noi therefore encouraged refugee families to articulate and accomplish goals themselves. For instance, they explained the benefits of having latrines, and provided instruction on their construction, but they largely stood aside when it came to building them. Yai and Noi's persistence in maintaining a sense of collective purpose helped to instill a sense of social entrepreneurship and ownership in the community households as well. It wasn't long before the community members were participating in creative decision-making, cobbling together various means of transport (ranging from bicycles to an employer's lorry) to get the kids to school.

Today, as in its inception five years ago, the project operates for under US \$3,000 per year (in constant 2005 dollars) despite having grown to serve almost 50 children and roughly 150 adults. This is especially impressive given the institutional limitations; there was no way to generate supplemental income within the community without breaking national laws and changing local Thai opinions to favor the Shan community.

Perhaps more remarkably, Shan children have taken the top three academic spots at one of the schools, they have generally outperformed Thai children academically in the past three years, and one has won a national essay contest (garnering the equivalent of three months' wages for his parents). This exceptional academic performance likely arises from the children's history of self-study, the after-school tutoring provided by Yai and Noi, and both the children's and parents' appreciation of the value of schooling.

This social entrepreneurship model helps the refugee children and their families to build the kind of relationships with Thai nationals that helped them access public schools in the first place, and to potentially overcome antipathies between refugees and locals. The refugee children's participation and success in the larger context of Thai schools also helps to reinforce the goodwill that persuaded public school teachers to allow these children to enroll initially, thus "[reproducing] the conditions" that make education accessible to new arrivals (Giddens, 1984).

The social and human capital created by social entrepreneurs pays dividends. Public school enrollment provides the children with the cognitive abilities and social credentials that they will need to survive. Educational attainment is highly correlated with longevity and higher health status (Ashenfelter, 1991; Tofler et al., 1993; Antonovsky, 1967). Further, reading and writing are essential skills that will help them access higher wage opportunities. In this case, educating Shan children clearly has benefits for the individuals and families. Yet it also impacts the local Thai community by providing higher baseline rates of education and thus higher rates of job creation and productivity (Ashenfelter, 1991; Glewe, 1991). If the Shan are seen as hard workers that contribute to the economy in the first generation and provide entrepreneurship and technical skills in the second generation, they are more likely to become accepted within Thailand.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, we explored how specific lessons from social entrepreneurship—creating social capital, a sense of ownership, agency, and collective buy-in—can build a strong

social program with the momentum and initiative to adapt to changing circumstances. We also showed how the social capital built by fostering community enthusiasm for children's education elicited the larger Thai community's sympathy for the project. These two factors helped allow the project to adapt to radical changes in environmental conditions, turning a death knell (the government's closing the informal school) into a great opportunity for advancement.

As addressed by researchers focusing on NGOs, "civil society" is not comprised of a monolithic mass but of often competing groups living in varying political circumstances, and universal formulas for fostering civil society, especially via top-down programs, are rarely successful (McIlwaine, 1998). The social entrepreneurship model's emphasis on flexibility and change, then, is useful in analyzing efforts by poor communities with no access to help from NGOs or governmental agencies. In this case study, the refugees' political status was ambiguous and constantly shifting; the social entrepreneurs therefore focused not on formal programs but on building the types of relationships that could then generate the popular support and acceptance that would facilitate surreptitious public school enrollment.

At first glance, the Shan Burmese refugees' ability to remain in Thailand might seem especially precarious. They have no designated land on which to reside, and they do not have the protection of refugee status. Yet from a social entrepreneurship perspective, the uncertainty and ambiguity of their standing in Thailand can be used to their advantage, giving them the socio-cultural space for self-determination. Likewise, it was the project's organic development, flexibility, and lack of official NGO status that rendered it more effective than a formal institution might have been. Though refugees' assertions of basic rights are usually perceived as treacherous political moves by Thai officials, social entrepreneurship has successfully shifted the political implications of school attendance in the case study community, even de-politicizing this assertion of human rights in the local Thai community's eyes.

In keeping with Dees' definition of social entrepreneurship, this project helped not only to meet education needs in the Shan Burmese refugee community, but it reduced Yai and Noi's burden of teaching the children and providing social services (Dees, p. 4). It also helped the community organize itself, so that momentum endures long after Yai and Noi had finished their work there. Finally, this combination of human and social capital hopefully facilitated the assimilation of the Shan immigrants into the Thai community for generations to come, with minimal friction and xenophobia.

We note that this case study fits well with Dees' description of social entrepreneurship (2003), but not with that of Fowler, who focused on the hybridization of market and commercial enterprises with social ends (2000). We suggest that further articulation of the social entrepreneurship model is needed. Based on our analysis, the social entrepreneurship model must explicitly include efforts that abide by its principles but do not include commercial ventures or a financial focus. Yai and Noi are successful social entrepreneurs specifically because they did not focus on, and were not held back by, financial costs; they did not focus on financial redistribution, but on the sharing of existing resources and creation of bridging social capital.

Nevertheless, some of the very risks articulated in earlier articles about NGOs and civil society remain for social entrepreneurs (McIlwaine, 1998; Fowler, 2000). Ironically, while the refugees' potential to become active members of the larger community increases with greater access to primary and secondary education, this education might also encroach upon the space they have to live as Shan Burmese. The road to assimilation is much easier for them than for other refugees, and it might substantially raise their collective standard of living. Higher standards of living and basic human rights should not automatically preclude the preservation of Shan Burmese culture. The Shan will need to explore different ways of strengthening social networks within their community, so that new connections are not built at the expense of those within their culturally indigenous community (Woolcock, 1998). In short, the next challenge surrounds how to maintain culture and heritage, so that the Shan will have a link to their past as they build their future.

This article, then, presents three clear potential avenues for further research. First, what are the tensions between short- and long-term effectiveness in social entrepreneurship? We have evaluated short- and some medium-term results of a project aimed at increasing access to education, but we have not yet evaluated the project's long-term impact on tensions regarding the refugees' assimilation into Thai society, preservation of Shan culture, and possible participation in a post-SPDC, democratic Burma. Long-term impact is therefore linked to larger nation-building debates, such as whether Shan State will pursue secession (Sen, 2001), and whether Burmese transitional justice should follow the model of post-Pinochet Chile, post-apartheid South Africa, or another framework (Rothenberg, 2001). Second, future research might explore the ways in which the social entrepreneurship itself helps to shape the needs and identity of constituents over time. To what extent will the goals and norms of the Shan refugee community change as school enrollment continues and increases? Even without government funding, questions of accountability and independence remain. Finally, further investigation is needed into the kinds of circumstances where social entrepreneurship thrives, and where it is not as appropriate. We believe that the strengths and lessons highlighted in this article's case of social entrepreneurship can be replicable, but they were highlighted in a case with malleable political and social contexts. This case, then, is more helpful in highlighting the strengths of the principles of the social entrepreneurship model than in articulating its limits.

### **Endnotes**

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