

By : Anita Low & Andros Goh



Jesuit Refugee Service



... serving forgotten refugees

The programme for our visit to the township of Mae Sot on the Thai-Burmese border was content-packed and had us calling on more than 10 Arakanese and 8 Karan families. We visited 3 schools run for the children of Arakanese and Karan ethnicities and 4 conflict-displaced Community-Based Organizations. We also dropped by briefly at the Police Immigration and Immigration Detention Centre which JRS Mae Sot offers its presence to.

Among the various categories of Income Generating Activities under the JRS Sustainable Livelihood Project, pig-raising, tailoring and running small grocery stores appear to hold a particular draw for beneficiaries. A number of families and at least one school have been engaged in pig rearing for a year. When we visited the pigs and piglets either in pens or free-ranging, they looked to be in good health. Of the entire population of pigs and piglets supplied under Project Mae Sot, only 1 piglet has been lost, unfortunately eaten up by a village dog.

Beneficiaries of JRS' training programs in tailoring and sponsorship scheme for sewing machines and miscellaneous tailoring supports, appear to be doing reasonably well too. They have been able to find employment in the domestic garment production industry in Mae Sot – with many of them cutting and sewing in small workshops and other individuals working from the home. The apparel industry attracts not only female workers, but a significant number of male workers as well.

Many beneficiary families have also opted to participate in JRS' rural grocery scheme in their respective communities, selling food staples, drinks and confectionary items etc. Clearly the many women who manage these groceries in their dwellings have the advantage of being able to mind their little children at the same time. That they are likely to experience monotony and boredom working from home is perhaps a small price to pay for the sense of relief they get from having a small source of income for their young family.

We also visited a couple of families who are engaged in the cooked food business – cooking from basic materials supplied by JRS and then selling them to buyers; and young people engaged in music CD production and video-production following training courses sponsored and using blank discs contributed by JRS.

In summary, based on what we have seen of the JRS Mae Sot Project one year into its inception and monthly data gathered and reported by JRS Mae Sot, we are optimistic that its Income Generating Activities are economically viable for both the beneficiaries and for JRS as well. More importantly, apart from the money, it was quite evident that many of those who were employed in IGAs seemed happier with better self-esteem than others whom we met, for example, the Arakanese Workers Union, who seemed unmotivated and lacking in a sense of direction and energy. The IGAs initiated by JRS are needed to give displaced migrants a sense of confidence and independence. The skills they acquire through participating in the IGAs will continue to be of benefit to them even if they decide to return to Myanmar to live. We recommend continuing support for the JRS Mae Sot Project for a second year, and then re-assessing the progress of the Project at the end of the term.

In addition, while not directly related to the Sustainable Livelihood Project, we recommend serious consideration to improving the quality of the drinking water and nutrition for these communities. JRS Mae Sot's laudable efforts in supporting education on human trafficking and human rights issues should also be sustained, and if possible, be expanded and raised to a higher level.

JRS Staff working on the ground



Sanan Santimanokul, a Thai national of Karen ethnicity and Catholic, is Project Assistant. He has worked with JRS in Mae Sot for the past 15 years and is a pillar of support for the JRS office in Mae Sot over several changes of office managers. He is scheduled to retire at the end of this year, and is concerned for his wife and 2 school-going children in Bangkok whom he has to support.

An intelligent and sensitive person, he was interested to know the Singapore success story and Lee Kuan Yew. Over evening discussions, we could that unity among minority Burmese ethnic groups will continue to be a struggle.



Freycy Mi Sheh is a Myanmar national of Lahu ethnicity and a Baptist Christian. She has been with JRS for 5 years and is presently the Director for JRS' Sustainable Livelihood Project. Many of her siblings work for humanitarian causes.

A highly organized and capable person with a high level of energy, she is a huge asset to JRS. She interacts comfortably and easily with the ethnic migrants in their vernacular languages, and is completely at home with them, playing with their toddlers, casually dispensing advice on baby-care to mothers; and climbing on pig-pens for a better look at the pigs. By sharing in their difficulties and sad stories, Mi Sheh has developed a close personal relationship with many in the community.

We left Mae Sot feeling inspired and uplifted by both Sanan's and Mi Sheh's sincerity and deep sense of dedication to serving the needs of the displaced migrants.. Their work is challenging but equally rewarding when through some small insignificant act, you have been able to bring some cheer, a faint ray of light to the lives of others who are in a far worse situation, and raise a smile on the children's faces. It is a gift from the simple act of standing in solidarity with the wider humanity.

Raising pigs among the roses plantation

Support from JRS for pig-rearing in huge rose plantations where several Arakanese families live, with the men working as manual laborers on the plantation grounds. Owing to high exposure to extensive chemical pesticides and fungicides used in the cultivation of roses, many migrant workers and their families suffer a high incidence of nasopharyngeal cancers, with life expectancy averaging 60 years.



Among students and school children

A total of 16 pigs and piglets has been given by JRS to Kwei Ka Baung School (a school run by a kindly and selfless 75-year old Buddhist monk), under the charge of a "pig-master" appointed from the teaching staff. The school has a population of 120, including 16 staff but only 3 toilets for males, and 3 for females. At that time, all 3 male toilets were spoilt, and so they shared the use of the female toilets.

The school is in desperate financial straits owing to a withdrawal of funding by a major donor. The school has had to drastically reduced lighting in the school compound. The path to the toilets which are in out in the open, and not within the building where the boarders live, are unlit at night.



Their water pump and storage is filthy and likely to be contaminated with microbes. The boarders live in a long wooden hut with a corrugated iron roof. The sleeping beds are made of wood. They have no pillows, no mattresses, no blankets, and no fans to help them cool off in Mae Sot's searing summer heat. The rooms in the hut have no doors between them and there is little privacy for the girls.



A Livelihood through Thread and Needle

JRS assists families in acquiring vocational skills such as tailoring, and purchases sewing machines and double-locking machines for their use.



Support the family

This man works in the garment factory. His meagre salary is not enough to feed his family of four. JRS supports families such as these with monthly food rations.

Support the single

This 50-year-old woman is unmarried and has no one to support her. Thread & needle is her only means of livelihood. In addition to the sewing machine, JRS also supplies bales of material for sewing, with the final sewn products sold for income.



Feeding the hungry

This lady cooks and sells beehoon to factory workers working nearby. The raw material is supplied by JRS.



A small rural grocery store

The income from business done at the store helps to provide for this family of 6 comprising 2 adults and 4 young children. The supplies in the store are courtesy of JRS.



Hope for the future

This young girl with a far-away look would like to become a school teacher, but she lacks an education and speaks little English. How does youth sustain hope in a situation like this?

*Where there is a need
Come & see
Be There*

