

## **Libraries for Refugees: The case of Myanmar Refugees along Thailand Border**

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### **Abstract:**

This article illustrates the roles of community library in the care and maintenance phase of refugee population with the case of Myanmar refugees fled to Thailand border since mid-1980s. The author argues that refugees' access to library services needs to be ensured as well as provision of water and sanitation, food, shelter, and medical service since the library preserves cultural identity and self-esteem of refugee populations who experience traumatic incidents.

**Keywords :** *Refugees education, Myanmar refugees, Community library, Cultural identity.*

### **What Refugees can Bring to Refugee Camps:**

The Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA), a Japan based NGO was officially established in 1981 during the influx of refugees from Cambodia to Thailand. Since its inception, the organization has emphasized the library project, providing library services to Cambodian refugees from 1980 to 1991, to Laotian refugees from 1985 to 1992, and to Myanmar refugees in Thailand from 2000 to present. SVA Nepal was established in 2015 for humanitarian actions for the affected people by the earthquake, and has supported construction of community library buildings and capacity development of library committees and librarians since 2020 in partnership with READ Nepal under the agreement with the Government of Nepal. SVA have also supported library improvement and reading promotion in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

People usually associate assistance to refugees with the provision of food, water and sanitation, health care, and shelter. Why, then, does SVA place such importance on

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library services for refugees? In answer to this question, let me recount one episode. When we first began mobile library activities in a Cambodian refugee camp in 1980, one of our staff members was walking through the camp with a Cambodian picture book called “The rabbit that ate bananas”. A woman suddenly snatched the book from his hands and began shaking uncontrollably, fighting to hold back her tears. It turned out that she had written that book. When she had lived in Phnom Penh, she was the renowned author of twenty picture books. She had been forced to flee her homeland, however, after the Pol Pot regime took over Cambodia in 1975 and began implementing its book-burning policy. Along the way, she discarded first one book and then another, finally parting with the one she held dearest. She barely escaped to the refugee camp with her life.

Refugees are forced to leave behind almost everything they possess when they flee their country. But there is one thing they cannot leave behind: their culture. SVA continues to promote library services in the belief that educational activities to restore and nurture the refugees’ culture can help them to help themselves.

### **Myanmar Refugees in Thailand:**

Various indigenous peoples including the Karen, have fled from Myanmar to Thailand since mid-1980s due to conflict and human rights infringement, and a total of 130,000 used to reside in nine different camps along the Thai-Myanmar border in 2000. The vast majority of refugees in the camps wish to return home as soon as their safety can be assured, and organized return has started in 2015 after signing of the ceasefire agreement between Myanmar government and ethnic armed organizations, which lead to the return of 15,000 refugees to Myanmar by the end of 2020. However, the military coup in February 2021 resulted in cancellation of ceasefire agreement and re-occurrence of conflict with many fled to jungles or to Thailand again and 91,000 being living in refugee camps as of January 2023.



The refugee camps were established in mid-1980s. Health, sanitation, food supply, and shelter are being provided through the cooperation of various aid organizations even though there is no electricity supply to houses and no permanent buildings. There are also elementary and secondary schools supported by international NGOs. There are two needs, however, that have not been adequately addressed. The first is the lack of cultural and leisure opportunities. People have no access to books and, there are no areas set aside for children to play safely except playground. As wage earning is prohibited in the camp,

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refugees cannot work. One high school student told me, "When I graduate, I want to work at something that is of service to others. But I don't know what to do." The other need is for opportunities to heal the psychological trauma borne by refugees including children and youth. When children draw freely, many of them depict the tragic events they have experienced such as the death of a father, war or life in the jungle.

It was in consideration of these factors that SVA decided to initiate the library project. From our experiences in Cambodian and Laotian refugee camps, we believed that children's healthy development depends not only on food and shelter, but also on books and stories that nourish the minds. Books and stories help develop children's creativity, enrich values and the attitudes, and impart the power to reduce their psychological stress.

### **The Library Project in Myanmar Refugee Camps:**

SVA currently supports a total of fifteen community libraries in seven refugee camps (See map) with the following interventions and processes under the agreement with Thai government.

#### **1. Establishment of a Library Committee:**

The library committee, management body of libraries in each camp is established as a first step. It decides the location of libraries to be established, library rules, recruits and appoints librarians among refugees, and bears responsibility for maintenance and administration of libraries. Committee members are all unpaid volunteers who consist of teachers, camp section leaders, and youth and women groups in refugee camps. It used to be difficult that equal number of women with men is appointed to the committee members due to the gender role division that exists in traditional Karen society. However, the chairpersons of library committees in two camps are now women. The process by which the committee is established is crucial because the successful solution of the many problems that occur after establishment of a library depend upon the committee's capacity.

#### **2. Construction of Library Building:**

The construction site is selected by library committee in consideration of the land conditions, population, and access for children. Bamboo and eucalyptus are the main building materials following the traditions of Karen houses. These are procured outside the camp and shipped in by SVA because cutting timber in the camp area is prohibited by Thai government. As there is no electricity in the camps, six semi-transparent plastic sheets about two meters in length are built into the roof as sky-lights to provide interior lighting. It takes only eight men about ten days to complete construction of a library building. The library has three rooms: a children's room, an adult room and a librarian's room. The children's room is the largest and has sufficient space to accommodate reading aloud and cultural activities with large groups of children such as arts and crafts, singing,

drawing pictures, and dancing. Shelves are made of steel for durability and are specially ordered from a Thai manufacturer. The shelves are designed to display the covers of picture books and are adjusted to child height to catch children's attention.

### **3. Training and Support of Librarians:**

The most difficult and, at the same time, the most rewarding task is training library staff. First a three-day pre-service training is held prior to the library opening. Content focuses on the basic theory and practices of library activities. Librarians usually assume that libraries are places for quiet reading, and the role of librarian is simply to organize and lend books. SVA libraries, however, are noisy places where children can freely learn and engage in various activities, essentially functioning as a children's centre in addition to library function. The role of librarian is not merely to lend books and to maintain and administrate the library but also to facilitate activities such as story-telling, songs, games, dance, games, arts and crafts, and paper-folding, and so on. Librarians learn various story-telling skills. Once the library has opened, in-service training sessions are held every two or three months to brush up their skills. Librarians are supported a small monthly compensation, which is regarded as incentive for medical and education staff in the refugee camps.

### **4. Selecting, Preparing and Distributing Books:**

Books are provided in two languages: Karen, the home language of most of the refugee population, and Burmese, the common language used in Myanmar and the one that refugees will need to use when they return to Myanmar. Books for youth and adults in Burmese can be purchased in bookshops from Yangon, Myanmar. As very few picture books for children are available in the Karen and Burmese language, SVA staff and capable teachers in the camp translated books from English and Thai to Karen and Burmese. The size and type of font for translated texts are adjusted for each page by computer, printed onto seals, and then pasted to the pages of the original language book. The book production process is thus very time consuming. We also purchase books from other NGOs and borrow any books in Karen owned by refugees for copying. There are five criteria for selecting children's books. They must have universal value, meaning books that have been read by children around the world for at least thirty years, foster intercultural understanding, express the importance of cooperation and bonds, explain how the body works or health and sanitation, or deal with environmental conservation. We currently have 420 titles of children's books in Karen and Burmese that have been translated from Thai and English. Each library is equipped with 4,000 copies of books for children and 10,000 books for adults.

### **5. Mobile Library Services:**

Our experience shows that very few children in the three to seven-year-old age group who live over fifteen-minute's walk from the library can come to library. Accordingly, mobile library services are provided. Teachers of nursery and primary school located far from library come to the library to select and borrow 10 – 50 books and carry them to their school with a plastic box. After several weeks, they come back to the library to return books and borrow other books. Prior to providing mobile library services, workshops are also held for teachers to train them in story-telling and reading promotion skills.

### **6. Book Publishing and *Kamishibai* production:**

As children's books in Karen and Burmese are limited, we have been publishing titles in both languages since the inception of the project. SVA works with writers and illustrators in the camp and have published 99 titles of books for children by 2022, which consists of both created stories and non-fictions. Titles include Karen and Burmese folk tales, HIV, Child's rights, and a Collection of Karen Jokes, to name a few. We also organize picture book contest which is joined by people in the camps. Winners' works are edited and published for distribution to camp libraries.

SVA has also facilitated the production of *Kamishibai* (paper theater), a traditional form of publication developed in Japan in which the text is printed on the back of illustrated sheets. The major difference between picture book and *Kamishibai* is that you need the performer who read aloud the text of corresponding illustrated sheet, and slides each illustrated sheet to show the next illustrated sheet to children. *Kamishibai* is interactive and entertaining tool of story-telling. Writers and illustrators has published 45 titles of *Kamishibai* which are performed by librarians.

### **7. Monitoring and Evaluation:**

After the library opens, monitoring is conducted every months by SVA staff. The librarians keep a daily record of the number of visitors, titles of books that were read aloud, any cultural activities held, and any problems or successes. The contents are discussed with the library staff during the monitoring sessions. Storytelling and other cultural activities are observed and suggestions are offered for improvement. Many different problems are recorded, such as loss or damage to books, a leaking roof, too many children visiting the library, and failure of some people to return books. SVA consults with the library committee and staff on possible solutions but many of the problems cannot be solved quickly. The pandemic of COVID-19 made the access to the camps difficult. Then, librarian use mobile phone to send monitoring data and photos and to have meeting with SVA staff in camps where data connection is available. Monitoring data in 2020 shows that fifteen community libraries in seven camps had 111,402 children users of seventeen and under and 68,599 adults users of eighteen and above, meaning that each library had

28 children users and 17 adults users a day on average.

### **NGOs as Catalysts for Change:**

I used to be involved in the formulation and inception period of this project in 1999-2001. It was two decades ago but I still remember that one camp leader told me that he personally liked SVA best among more than ten NGOs working in the camp because SVA regards refugees as the subject who can improve their life by themselves, not as the object who receive aid. The late Mr. Arima Jitsujo, the founder and the first Executive Director of SVA, often reminds SVA staff that NGOs are catalysts. In a chemical reaction, catalysts do not change, but they can activate and accelerate changes in others. Refugees are not powerless or wretched objects of pity. They are people with the capacity to live in difficult conditions; people who have pride in themselves. The role of NGOs is to create opportunities for them to further develop their powers.

Lastly, let me quote the poem composed by the 10 years old boy who regularly visits the camp library-

*The library has come! The library has come!! I am so happy now!!!  
I have to go to school every day.  
Some classes are difficult.  
Teachers sometimes scold and beat me.  
In the clothe with hole, friends laugh at me.  
Parents scold, too, if I stay outside too long.  
But, now the library has come.  
After being scolded, I become happy while reading at the library  
Books never scold and beat me.  
Nor laugh at me in the clothes with holes.  
Anyway, I feel content in the library.  
I love the library !!!*

### **Conclusion:**

This article illustrates the roles of community library in the care and maintenance phase of refugee population with the case of Myanmar refugees fled to Thailand border since mid-1980s. Community library in refugee camps provides non-formal education opportunities, access to information, and place for children, youth and adults to meet and spend time with constructive manner in the situation where no electricity, movement and job opportunities are provided and allowed. The author argues that refugees' access to library services needs to be ensured as well as provision of water and sanitation, food, shelter, and medical service since the library preserves cultural identity and self-esteem of refugee populations who experience traumatic incidents.