

# **GLEN Internship Report**

**Evaluation of the GLEN Internship in Myanmar by Šárka Maroušková**

**Internship title: Empowering young people through community-based education**

**Internship number: 5000400625**

**Internship period: 20 July – 20 October 2014**

**Internship location: Hpa-an, Karen State, Myanmar**

**Host organisation: Tounge La'Yat – Educational Gathering Group (EGG)**

**Home organisation: INEX-SDA**

## Summary

### **English**

My internship was called Empowering Young People Through Community-Based Education and took place in Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, Myanmar, from 20 July to 20 October 2014. Hpa-an is a medium-sized, spread-out city located in the south-eastern part of Myanmar bordering with Thailand. It's a region which has been slowly opening up to tourists but in some parts, there is no existing tourist infrastructure. Having said that, Karen State can boast with spectacular landscapes, mountains, caves and green paddy fields so it has lots to offer. The political situation in the region is still very fragile; there has been ongoing fights between the Burmese and Karen armies and their fractions, people living in far-off villages live in permanent insecurity supported by the lack of information. My host organization was a community-based program Tounge La'Yat – Educational Gathering Group (EGG). My job was to work as teacher of English and Community Development and together with my tandem partner and we were encouraged to conduct creativity seminars. Our results were that the students progressed in their English-speaking skills a great deal, they got confidence and they improved in critical thinking a lot. I also created Facebook pages and websites for both EGG and their new community café Veranda for which I also collaborated on creating their marketing strategy.

### **Česky**

Moje stáž Empowering Young People Through Community-Based Education se uskutečnila v městě Hpa-an, hlavním městě Karenského státu v Myanmaru od 20.7. do 20.10. 2014. Hpa-an je středně velké, rozlehlé město v jihovýchodní části Myanmaru sousedící s Thajskem. Tento region se v současnosti začíná pomalu otevírat turismu, ale v některých částech je turistická infrastruktura stále neexistující. Karenský stát má ale návštěvníkovi rozhodně co nabídnout; jsou zde spektakulární krajiny, hory, jeskyně a zelená rýžová políčka. Politická situace v regionu je stále křehká; čas od času zde vypuknou boje mezi barmskou a karenskou armádou nebo jejich frakcemi a zejména lidé žijící ve vesnicích žijí v permanentní nejistitě podpořené nedostatkem relevantních a spolehlivých informací. Moje hostující organizace se jmenovala Tounge La'Yat – Educational Gathering Group (EGG). Do programu jsem nastoupila jako učitelka angličtiny a komunitního rozvoje a vedle této činnosti jsme s mým tandem partnerem mohli realizovat i různé kreativní workshopy. Během naší činnosti jsem zaznamenala, že studentům se zlepšila schopnost hovořit a rozumět anglicky, získali větší sebevědomí a také si zlepšili kritické myšlení. Vedle toho jsem vytvořila facebookové a webové stránky pro EGG i jejich novou komunitní kavárnu Veranda, u které jsem spoluvymýšlela i jejich marketingovou strategii.

## **Introduction**

I'm a 30-year old young professional and I have been thinking of applying to the GLEN program for many years but there was never a good time. Last year I got stuck with my job at that time, feeling a little burnt-out and I started looking for new opportunities. One of my closest friends recently got back from her GLEN internship in Uganda and that gave me an important impulse to finally apply. The internship in Myanmar opened for the first time and it suddenly became my first choice although I knew very little about this country and I had only a vague idea about its political and social struggles. But I could relate to the topic very easily as I have been interested in community development for a long time and I had experience in public relations and promotion which could also be of use. I didn't have any teaching experience at that time but I didn't see it as an obstacle, I was really keen to try something new. I think the selection committee could see my enthusiasm and motivation and I was lucky enough to be selected in the end although there was a strong competition for this internship in particular.

Before GLEN, I had some volunteering experience but never a long-term one and I got to a point of my life where I felt I had to start giving something back to the society as I felt I had been very lucky in my life. I also wanted to broaden my perspectives and meet new people and learn something new. To me, global education should be a substantial part of everyone's education. Thanks to my background in Culture Studies, I already had some idea about cultural relativism, global interdependencies and the white privilege. I looked forward to get into such topics deeper during our preparatory seminars but that hardly ever happened. I have to say that I was strongly critical to the seminars – I saw them as necessary but I didn't like how they were conducted, I didn't have a feeling that the group session leaders knew more about the topic than me, the way those sessions were conducted were not well prepared and rather amateurish so I ended up feeling quite bored. I appreciated only a few sessions with guest speakers coming from academic background. The biggest benefit of the preparatory seminars was meeting new people, getting into interesting interactions and out of my daily routine.

I was strongly attracted to the idea of spending 3 months in a country of Global South however bizarre and twisted in might sound. I love to travel and spending a longer period of time at one place is a great way to learn about the environment, about the people and their way of life and that's the real traveling for me as it gets me “out of the tourist bubble”. Me and my tandem partner Maksim Galanin from Estonia started to talk with our host organization Tounge La'Yat quite early, right after the first seminar as there were concerns about the obstacles in the process of visa

issuance. The school director Saw Khine Thet Tun was very helpful at answering all our questions and addressing all our possible obstacles.

Toung La'Yat was founded about 10 years ago by a few young enlightened Karen people who wanted to support their communities by educating young people between 18 and 30 years old and empowering them to become future community leaders. Before we came to Myanmar, we hadn't been able to find much information on the project on the Internet but soon we learned that it operates as a school with adjacent rooms for students from more distant villages. The teachers are all Karen, most of them speak fluent English. At the time of our internship, there were three teachers, one administrator and the principal Saw Khine Thet Tun who took several months of personal leave shortly after we left. The students were between 17 and 27 years old, most of them from various parts of Karen State, a few from different and more far-off regions. The program was paid but the fee was affordable and students could apply for scholarships in case their families couldn't afford to cover the tuition.



*Me and EGG students*

The task for me and my Estonian tandem partner was to teach, conduct creativity workshops and become parts of their community. We were also encouraged to take part in the process of building the new community café which was another project of EGG financially supported by Ministry of Foreign Affairs Czech Republic.

## **The Internship**

### **Political, Environmental and Cultural Situation in Karen State, Myanmar**

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar was ruled by the military for almost 40 years and in the course of the years, both the country and the people were being exploited by the army generals and any signs of protests were always violently suppressed. In the 2010 elections, the winning Union Solidarity and Development Party stated a transition to liberal democracy as one of their goals. However, in 2014 the political situation in the country was ways far from democracy. Especially along the borders, there are numerous fights between Burmese army and ethnic armies taking place from time to time. The ethnic Karens stood by the British fighting during the WW2 and for that they were promised independence, which never happened. Since 1947, the Karen army has been fighting for their independence while the ordinary people have been bullied and exploited by the Burmese army. And this condition persists until now. When we arrived in Hpa-an, it was in the midst of rainy season and we crossed the borders in Mae Sot, Thailand to Myawaddy, Myanmar which opened recently. It took us about 10 hours by car to get to Hpa-an, it was ways longer than we expected as the weather condition was very bad that day and cars and buses got stuck on a narrow, one-way path which goes through the Dawna Mountains. The political situation changed during my internship, there were fights going on in neighboring towns and villages. I only learnt about that from on-line news websites, Hpa-an itself was safe and unaffected.

As for the environment, Karen State offers breath-taking landscapes with the combination of caves, mountains, pagodas and incredibly green paddy fields which one gets never tired of. The region started to open up to tourists only recently so luckily, it's still pretty much unaffected by the tourist industry. As a foreigner I could travel and walk around quite freely, I felt safe as there were always local people around and although they didn't speak English at all, I hardly ever felt as an intruder.

Hpa-an itself was a very pleasant city to live in. It is located on Thanlwin River surrounded by numerous caves and paddy fields and with the monumental Mount Zwegabin overlooking the surroundings. Most people are ethnic Karens but as the rest of Myanmar, Hpa-an was also ethnically very diverse. The prevailing religion was buddhism but there were also a large Muslim community. At the moment, Myanmar is in the midst of a large anti-muslim movement which is affecting all spheres of everyday life. However, in Hpa-an such symptoms were hidden under the surface and I noticed anti-muslim stickers on every other house.

For a foreigner, life in Hpa-an can be rather confusing as hardly anyone speaks English, all signs are in Myanmar and one does not have any idea about what is going on. But the pace of life is rather slow and one can get around easily on a bike. I have been very lucky when it comes to people that I met during my internship. Hpa-an has a very lively NGO/civil initiatives community. Observing this kind of environment made me see the progress that the country has made. Some years ago – as my local friends told me – it would be impossible for a few people to sit together at a coffee table and now there were civil initiatives people meeting up and talking things over quite freely.

Being a foreigner in a country with difficult political situation bears some obstacles. One has to show a passport at check-points and has to stay at hotels and guesthouses which had to announce his / her presence to the authorities every day. I also wasn't allowed to go to certain parts of Karen State which were still controlled by the Karen army. Apart from this, I haven't felt any signs of disapproval with my activities from local authorities. But it's true that I tried to be cautious.



*A view of Hpa-an*

### **The Organization**

As mentioned above, the organization was founded about 10 years ago by a few young Karen people who wanted to empower the Karen community threatened by the ongoing civil war. There are many struggles and problems within the Karen community nowadays and due to lack of money and work possibilities, most young people go to Thailand to work which breaks off families and

affects the interpersonal relationships. This recent tendency also has a huge economical and social impact as it breaks off communities and decreases their integrity and sustainability a great deal. As Myanmar currently undergoes rapid changes economically-, politically- and socially-wise, there is a lack of young intellectuals or community leaders who could reflect upon these changes and who would be able to bring about a positive change.

Toung La'Yat – Educational Gathering Group (further mentioned as EGG) focuses on young people mainly from Karen communities who finished high school. The program offers them a kind of superstructural education which might help them when they start looking for a job and which should also keep them from going to Thailand to do unqualified manual jobs. The curriculum consists of English, Community Development, Numeracy, Social Science, Computers and IT and a wide range of community-oriented activities. The subjects are being taught partly in English and partly in Myanmar.

The staff of the organization is rather small – at the time when we arrived, there was the principal and 3 other teachers and one administrator. However, there were also many people involved with this organization ranging from EGG alumni and board members to project coordinators of the local ADRA Myanmar office.



*The building of EGG*

EGG was also very active when it comes to various community events and networking with related

organizations and NGOs. At the time of our arrival, EGG started building a new community café which was called Veranda and opened on 3 October 2014. The staff of Veranda recruited from the EGG alumni giving them a chance to work for the community and use the knowledge they learnt while being EGG students. From my personal point of view, Veranda was a ground-breaking project for Hpa-an, not only because it started to serve real brewed coffee. Already during the testing period it was frequently visited by local NGOs who found a suitable workshop / meeting space, local civil initiatives and curious local people.

### **The Internship Itself**

We started talking with the host organization right after the first seminar and our contact person – program director Saw Khine Thet Tun – was very helpful and patient with all our questions and concerns. However, when we were leaving Europe, we didn't have a precise idea what we were going to do as Khine Thet Tun gave us only some suggestions. But these concerns were quickly and effectively resolved during the first days in Hpa-an. I picked English and Community Development because I have always been interested in this topic and I was excited to get a new perspective. My tandem partner picked Computers and IT and Social Science. We also agreed that on Fridays and Saturdays we would do some creativity workshops for the students.

Having said that the cooperation with EGG was practically flawless, the cooperation with my tandem partner was not. We realized that we were not “the perfect match” quite soon, after the first seminar, and from my perspective, he was a very difficult person to get along with. He would complain all the time, his actions lacked empathy and he wasn't culturally sensitive. At the beginning I tried to spend more time with him so that we get used to each other but he had different priorities and our tandem relationship wasn't one of them. So we ended up each doing our own job which worked quite well in the end.

We started teaching at the end of July. I taught 6 classes a week, my tandem partner did 3. On weekends, we conducted the workshops independently on each other but they were not that frequent as EGG was involved in many community events and festivals which we also took part in. The students were at first a little shy but very bright and motivated and I was very happy to watch their progress. I suggested EGG a simple website for their online presentation so I worked on that in my free time. I also got involved in the preparations of the community café – together with the Veranda staff and the Czech ADRA coordinator Marketa Lancova, we designed the menu, took photographs, started a Facebook page and a webpage. The team energy was very positive and it was a pleasure to

work with those amazing people.

### **Problems, Challenges and Solutions**

One of the greatest challenges of my internship was the relationship with my tandem partner which was in fact non-existent. At the beginning I felt quite frustrated about that but later when I started to live my own life and do my part of the work, it turned out to be a great benefit because I met quite a few great local people who became my close friends.

At one point of my internship, right before our first trip to Thailand to extend our visa, I also started to reflect on my position as a foreigner. Before I came to Myanmar, I had heard so many stories about foreigners being followed and spied on, deported from the country that I started to be afraid for myself as my position at EGG was not a secret at the hotel I lived in or among a few people I was meeting at coffee shops, restaurants... I didn't feel like lying about my work because the interest of the local people was genuine and sincere. But after I was given the visa, I realized that my worries were unsubstantiated.

It was difficult to deal with the issues of security at times. I started to be interested in political situation in Karen State, I read various news and analyses and at one point, further fights broke out in areas not far from Hpa-an. I also heard stories from my students and my friends about Burmese army fighting close to their village, how their families had to hide or run away which was hard to deal with. It made me think about the value of peace and security in a person's life.

I think that the issues of personal security and issues of controlled behavior I had to face definitely broadened my perspective and made me grateful that I live in a country without an omnipresent military regime which strives to control all spheres of life.

### **Results, Learning Effects and Experiences**

The internship itself was invaluable for me in the framework of the GLEN cycle and as a life experience. I could see results of my work, they were becoming more tangible and I could see the positive changes in the community happening.

One of the visible results of my work are the Facebook pages and website for both EGG and Veranda café<sup>1</sup>. It was the first time I built a website from a scratch but I thoroughly enjoyed it. At

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1 <http://toungelayat.weebly.com> and <http://verandacafe.weebly.com>

this moment, more and more young people in Myanmar are getting on social networks as the Internet is getting more accessible so I can see people interacting with each other through Facebook and getting engaged with Veranda or EGG posts. There are many risks when it comes to social networking but also many benefits and this easy connectivity is one of them.

As for my teaching methods, I have already mentioned that I hadn't had any previous experience before I came to Myanmar. But Saw Khine Thet Tun provided me with teaching plans for my classes so I followed them and I started to research various activities and teaching techniques on the Internet. Every class I started with some sort of a ice breaker which also introduced the topic of our lesson. Then I introduced some necessary terms followed by an activity either in groups or in pairs. At the end of each class I asked the students to write a short reflection on what we talked about. Such reflections were an important tool for me to see if they understood the topic and for them an opportunity to practice writing. What I appreciated about teaching was that I could get an instant feedback on my methods, I could clearly see students' engagement or their distance when they got lost or bored. My personal aim was that the students get more confidence in talking with me in English and they improve their critical thinking skills. I tried to approach them with empathy and respect for their culture and their backgrounds. I also tried to put the topics into a more global perspective as I could see that the students were curious about life in my part of the world.

During my internship I also conducted several workshops focusing on creative writing, basic project management and promotion. This was a big challenge as those workshops were 4 hours long so I had to prepare thoroughly. At times I faced the fact that the terms we talked about were too difficult for the students to understand and at times I found out that some activities were culturally non-transferable. In the end I realized that what the students appreciated the most was drawing and painting, either on their own or in groups so I adjusted some activities accordingly.

I had many personal projects in mind during my internship. With a local friend we wanted to create a map of Hpa-an which could also work as a touristic guide of interesting sights, good eateries and coffee shops written from a local point of view but we never got to finish it due to the lack of time. But this only shows how many possibilities there are in Hpa-an thanks to a few active and engaged local people.

## **Conclusion**

During my internship I have fallen in love with Myanmar and its people although I can also see that I have been very lucky with the people I met and I worked with and that this impression is a result of the time when I was there. The country is changing rapidly these days and I'm afraid that the charm of this far-off country not destroyed by tourism might be away in a couple of years.



*Countryside in Karen State*

I think that I will never be able to give back all the good that I was given there. But that was an important life lesson – try to treat people with love, empathy and patience. Thanks to the internship I was also able to slow down and think a lot of things for myself through.

I really enjoyed teaching and the good feedback from my students and colleagues boosted my confidence so I hope I will be able to work in the field of education in one way or the other in the future. I learnt a lot not only about methodology but also about human psychology and interpersonal relations.

I realized that a life in a country of Global South doesn't have to be that different from my life here. One has to find a place to stay, pay the rent, eat, go shopping for groceries, work, deal with difficult people and spend time with friends. But the internship made me think a lot about our privileged part of the world and made me reflect on the importance and value of peace and education in one's life.

Right now I see a great responsibility to talk about my experience with people and break some taboos connected to life in a country of Global South. I also thought a lot about tourism and its effects on local people and their culture as during my travels I have met so many culturally insensitive people who just wanted to enjoy themselves and measured everything else accordingly.

In the future I would like to stay in touch with my Myanmar friends and the country and I'm now looking for ways how to do it. I would like to promote the idea of responsible and culturally sensitive tourism. My experience showed me how big impact can one's deeds have on the local environment. We indeed live in an interconnected world where our choices can affect lives of people on the other side of the world.

As for the planned global education activities, I would like to start up a Facebook page where one group of students from the Czech Republic and a group of students from EGG could share their lives through pictures. I would like to focus on this small group of people as I believe that this direct interaction could have the biggest impact on their lives. I would like to encourage them to share pictures from their everyday life, of their homes, families and friends so as both groups could see and reflect upon their own lives in a more global context.

Together with the group of Czech GLEN alumni, we'd like to organize talks and presentations for people from retirement homes as we see this group of people as forgotten not only by their relatives but also by the media and institutions. Those people didn't have much chance to travel as that was restricted during the communist regime but people are curious and we think it's good idea to spread the idea of global education not only among the young and educated but also among people who never got a chance to learn about this.

Thinking and writing about my internship and reflecting on the whole GLEN cycle, I'm very grateful that I got a chance to take part in it. It really opened my horizons, changed my perspective and let me meet interesting and inspiring people whose memory will be with me for a very long time. It really was a life-changing experience however cliché it might sound.