

Empowerment through Economic Literacy Training: The ALTSEAN Experience

ALTSEAN-Burma

IN 1996, Burma's impending membership into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) caused concern among members of the human rights community. The combination of the military-ruled country's notorious human rights record and the poor performance of ASEAN member-states in the human rights and democracy field was a recipe for disaster. It justified the fear that Burma's entry into ASEAN would lower the bar of human rights accountability within the organization rather than promote the country's democratization.

The Birth of ALTSEAN-Burma

Southeast Asian human rights organizations held an alternative ASEAN meeting on Burma at the Chulalongkorn University in October 1996 in solidarity with and support for the people of Burma in their struggle for human rights and democracy. This meeting sought to develop alternatives to the official policy and practice adopted by ASEAN member-governments, seen by majority of the Burmese citizens as promoting anti-human rights sentiments.

This meeting concluded with the establishment of the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, or ALTSEAN-Burma. The network members consisted of human rights and social justice non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, think tanks, academics, journalists, and student activists from ASEAN member-states. It adopted the primary objective of forming a solidarity movement that would hold ASEAN accountable for accepting Burma into the organization despite the Burmese government's well-documented human rights abuses.

ALTSEAN-Burma has the following goals:

- To contribute to efforts to achieve a democratic transition in Burma;

- To advance ASEAN reforms that will uphold democracy and human rights among member-states, particularly Burma;
- To contribute to a more effective Southeast Asian Burma movement;
- To support meaningful participation of women and youth from Burma in the movement;
- To enhance capacity-building programs to address the human resources and strategic needs of Burmese organizations; and
- To promote mutually reinforcing advocacy messages and strategies by the Burma movement.

ALTSEAN-Burma seeks to meet these goals through a variety of programs and activities. It is engaged in advocacy, campaigns, and capacity-building to support the human rights and democracy movements in Burma. This is done by building and strengthening strategic relationships among the key networks and organizations from Burma, ASEAN and the international community. It seeks to implement innovative strategies that are responsive to the emerging needs and urgent developments, both in Burma and within ASEAN. It undertakes activities to empower local Burmese activists from all ethnic groups of Burma, particularly women and youth. In line with its purpose of building subregional solidarity, the network has also supported human rights causes in other countries within the subregion.

In the nineteen years of its existence, ALTSEAN-Burma has provided valuable information on matters relating to Burma and ASEAN, particularly the current human rights situation in Burma, to legislators, legislative aides, diplomats, NGO representatives, and other key decision-makers in the international community.

It maintains good relations with journalists, providing both on-the-record and off-the-record analysis on the developments in Burma and in the region. Its research team has produced a variety of publications and materials on Burma. As of February 2015, the research team has produced ninety-nine issues of ALTSEAN-Burma's main publication, the monthly *Burma Bulletin*, as well as over eighty thematic briefers on a variety of subjects such as elections, Rohingya violence, armed conflict, arrest of human rights activists, and land confiscations.

ALTSEAN-Burma regularly conducts the Women's Internship Program, which is the first women-specific training program for Burma. It began in 1997, and has greatly increased women's participation and leadership in

the Burmese human rights movement. As of December 2014, a total of one hundred thirty-nine women had completed ALTSEAN-Burma's intensive internship program. They came from thirty-seven women, youth, and environmental organizations from thirteen ethnic groups in Burma. Many have gone on to become leaders in their own communities and movements.

Filling in the Human Rights Advocacy Gap

In the course of its work, ALTSEAN-Burma began to recognize the gap in the human rights advocacy work being done in Burma. Specifically, the members of the organization saw the need to examine the impact that economic mismanagement of the government had in the democratization process in the country, as well as the linkages between human rights abuses and severe economic mismanagement.

There was also a growing awareness that in many post-conflict or post-authoritarian transitional situations, the focus of most human rights groups was on political reforms, while economic or human security concerns were not prioritized. But, as made plainly evident in the transition processes of countries emerging from post-conflict or post-authoritarian situations, without the implementation of relevant and people-centered economic policies during transition, the consequent economic policies can actually intensify rather than alleviate the inequities and injustices suffered under repressive regimes or conflict. As ALTSEAN-Burma's coordinator, Debbie Stothard, perfectly sums up, *"[y]ou can't eat democracy, but you should be able to eat better because of democracy; democracy involves public participation in the development of economic policy."*

To address this gap, ALTSEAN-Burma developed an Economic Literacy Training (ELT) Program for Burmese activists and advocates. The ELT program aims to help Burmese activists and advocates gain a general understanding of key economic issues in the context of Burma. It also seeks to develop their skills in using economic data and economic arguments in promoting human rights and democracy in Burma. In this way, the program allows Burmese activists and advocates to increase their ability to actively participate in economic policy development debates during Burma's transition.

In the short term, the ELT program aims to build the capacity of local activists and advocates to recognize the links between economics and human rights. Thus they learn economic terms and concepts that would enable

them to use economic arguments in their human rights advocacy. This approach strengthens the impact of their advocacies, particularly among states and stakeholders that prioritize economic interests over human rights and democracy.

In the medium term, the ELT program aims to build the capacities of Burmese activists to participate in the formulation of Burma's economic policies. Given their experiences on the ground, they are well-placed to propose policy solutions that address the economic injustices in their communities, as well as throughout the country. The ELT program also aims to develop the skills and capabilities of Burmese activists in protecting and ensuring sustainability of economic development at the local level.

The ELT Workshops

The ELT program is implemented through a series of workshops. The first ELT workshop was held in January 2005. Since then, the contents of the workshop have expanded and were tailored to address the particular challenges currently facing Burma as it opened up to foreign direct investment and to multinational corporations interested in its vast natural resources. The ELT workshop at present covers the following main topics:

- Political economy and the meaning of development;
- Agriculture;
- Natural resources;
- Industry and services;
- Human resources and human capital development;
- Financing development; and
- International trade and finance.

Each topic is presented in a module that includes the following basic components: a) identification of sectors in the country affected by issues related to the topic; b) discussion of the common challenges that these sectors face; and c) analysis of examples of solutions to challenges adopted in other countries. Participants undertake the exercise of developing policy proposals to address particular challenges faced by the different sectors.

An additional module, the "Making Policies Come Alive" module, is implemented whenever time allows. This module identifies stakeholders in

policy discussions and how they (stakeholders) should interact with the government in policy formulation and implementation. The participants consider key questions in policy formulation and implementation under this module:

What are the pros and cons of a policy in terms of people who may benefit and those who may lose out from it? (Cost-Benefit Analysis, Opportunity Costs & Risk Assessment)

How will communities, businesses and other stakeholders be involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of this policy? Is the government playing a significant role in its implementation or is it simply providing incentives to stakeholders and regulatory framework for implementation?

Who exactly is in charge of the implementation of each aspect of the policy? Who will have the final say in case of conflict among stakeholders?

How will this policy be communicated to the public and key stakeholders to ensure optimal public support?

This module also gives participants a glimpse of the process of translating national goals and policies into local initiatives at the community level. It looks at how the people in the communities themselves can come up with their implementing initiatives at the local level, within the general framework and guidelines of the national policy.

After discussing these topics, the participants are given the opportunity to put their knowledge to the test. In the final group exercise, participants role play as ministers of government, tasked with developing a key economic policy based on the demands of their constituencies. Each minister presents the draft policy before the other ministers of government. After these presentations, the ministers engage in parliamentary debate; they negotiate and argue in defense of their policies in case of conflict with those from the other ministers. In this way, participants get a glimpse of the challenges that government ministers face in coming up with policies that address the needs of their constituencies, and are not in conflict with the priorities of other ministries at the same time.

Nexus Between Economics and Human rights

The ELT workshops take a political economy approach to the study of economics, focusing on the interplay between the economy, society, and politi-

cal institutions. In particular, the emphasis is on defining the different kinds of development and examining who benefits from certain types of development. Prominent in these discussions are economic, social, and cultural rights and how these rights are affected in the country's quest for economic development.

One of the most problematic consequences of the current government's economic development model and the numerous large-scale development projects it has embarked on in the past several years is the widespread increase in the number of land confiscation cases. These land confiscations, seen as necessary adjuncts to pave the way for the country's economic growth, violate the right to food security, right to livelihood, and right to adequate standards of living of those in the affected areas. These violations have resulted in a resurgence of social conflict in affected areas, with discontent growing among the displaced communities.

This, in turn, has given rise to militarization, with troops being stationed to protect large-scale development projects. The presence of military battalions around or near villages has resulted in increasing instances of human rights violations in the form of forced labor, illegal taxation/extortion, and sexual violence.

Other pressing issues covered during the workshop include the problems that arise in the transition from subsistence agriculture to agro-business economy. The problems take the form of forced growing of crops and forced sale of harvests. The social and environmental costs of natural resource exploitation, particularly the adverse impact of projects that fundamentally affect the social development of communities, are also essential subject matters included in the workshop.

The Experience So Far

ALTSEAN-Burma has provided more than fifty ELT workshops to over seven hundred participants (more than half of them were women) at the end of 2014. The responses from participants and partner organizations have been overwhelmingly positive, with ALTSEAN-Burma getting regular requests for ELT workshops.

The ELT workshops provide a common focus for the participants who are affected by ethnic, religious, gender, linguistic, social and geographical differences. Since the economic problems of the country and the effects of

economic mismanagement are felt across all communities, regardless of ethnic identity, the participants more easily recognize the similarities of their experiences rather than focus on their differences. And at the end of the workshop, the participants have the opportunity to identify possible solutions by consensus.

The workshops have also helped participants to appreciate the need to strike a balance in the country's economic policy between the needs of specific communities, environmental protection and the need for national development. This is particularly true with regards to the policies pertaining to the use of the country's vast natural resources. Given the potential of natural resources fueling economic and social development, and the danger of environmental devastation as consequence, finding an economic policy that ensures sustainable natural resource management is a key matter.

Additionally, the workshops enabled the participants to understand the connection between the government's economic policies and their effects on the lives of ordinary citizens. The Saffron Revolution is an example. In 2005, when the ELT program began, fuel subsidies were greatly reduced and the price of gas went up by several hundred percent. Despite this, there was minimal mobilization or protest in the country. But in 2007, the increase in gas prices caused by the further removal of fuel subsidies was enough to spark massive protests that spread throughout the country.

The demands made during the Saffron Revolution had the same economic arguments as those employed in rallying people to join the protests in 2007. What happened between 2005 and 2007?

Debbie Stothard believes that ALTSEAN-Burma's implementation of the ELT program contributed greatly to the surge in discussions about the economic misrule of the country, with citizens becoming aware of economic justice and their right to demand for access to food and to adequate standards of living. Activists were more confident to use these arguments to rally and mobilize an already aggrieved population in nationwide protests that surprised the international community.

In 2008, a forum of organizations from different ethnic communities called the Ethnic Community Development Forum (ECDFF)¹ embarked on a project implemented throughout Burma to come up with an alternative development policy. The ELT program was an integral part of this process. Prior to the formulation of this alternative development policy, ALTSEAN-Burma was called upon to deliver two ELT workshops with different groups

of Burmese youth. Armed with the knowledge gained from these workshops, these youth returned to the different states in Burma and organized their own ELT workshops with grassroots activists, farmers, and other youth, paying particular attention to the development, agriculture, and natural resources modules. The ECDF held approximately two hundred consultation meetings at the grassroots level, meeting with farmers to find out how the country's economic policies were affecting them and asking for their proposals on how to address the issues resulting from these policies.

These consultations resulted in the formulation of alternative local development policies for the agricultural and natural resources sectors, launched between the end of 2010 and early 2011. For the first time, local stakeholders were empowered with the voice to come up with solutions and recommendations to the economic problems of the country. Given the personal nature of the problems encountered by the local stakeholders as a result of the economic mismanagement occurring at the national level, the policy proposals coming from the ground were practical and sensible, taking into consideration a number of factors that were often overlooked by the politicians in the capital. Unfortunately, when ECDF first tried to present these alternative local development policies to the legislators, they were ignored. But the struggle continued.

This project illustrates the empowering effect that the ELT workshops have on the participants. They provide participants with a working knowledge of the basics of economics, and the impacts of the economic system on their everyday lives. At the same time, they value the capacity of these participants to come up with their own solutions by harnessing the knowledge they acquired from living with the realities of economic mismanagement.

Several partner organizations inside Burma have also begun incorporating economic analysis in their human rights reports, providing a more holistic presentation for their readers. These reports cover a variety of topics, ranging from human trafficking to drug production in Burma. The international human rights organizations have responded positively to the more nuanced presentations of the issues by the partner organizations inside Burma, and paid more attention to the fundamental linkages between human rights abuses and the dire economic situation in the country.

Interactions during these workshops have also contributed much to ALTSEAN-Burma's understanding of the extent of economic mismanagement, cronyism and corruption inside Burma. Some examples include the

prevailing fertilizer and seed monopolies that are among the challenges that most small farmers have to contend with. In the course of these workshops, the participants have been very candid in sharing information and the experiences of their communities. Participants' contributions in the form of personal narratives have brought the realities of conflict, militarization, and repression closer to home for ALTSEAN-Burma, giving abstract issues a human face and a human voice.

During one of the seminars, a Shan farmer disclosed how, because of the militarization in his area, the families of some members of the military took over land in the area and built a small dam on the river used by the community as their water source. This effectively reduced his harvest from two cycles in a year to only one. Because of his decreased income, he could no longer afford to buy pesticides for the next crop cycle. When a pest infestation hit the farms in the area, he lost half his harvest. In effect, he had reduced his agricultural output down to 25 percent of his original output in the space of two years. The farmer also explained how these conditions served as push factors for those in the area to seek work outside the country and become migrant workers.

This personal narrative demonstrated the very real economic impact that violent conflict in the region had on the surrounding areas. Apart from violence, forced labor, and the attendant displacement of communities, militarization and violent conflict also affect the political economy in the vicinity. In particular, the changed situation arose from the direct intervention of the state, via the increased military presence in the area, which resulted in violations of the rights of the local community to adequate standard of living, including the right to be free from hunger, as well as the opportunity to have continuous improvement of their living conditions.

The Future of the ELT Program

ALTSEAN-Burma continues to improve the ELT program. It is developing a Business and Human Rights module. The new module aims to make local communities and activists understand the interest of the international community, particularly foreign businesses, in Burma. This module will concentrate on the role of businesses in either the promotion or the obstruction of human rights protection in the country. It seeks to provide the local people with knowledge about measures that can help prevent the im-

punity perpetrated by the government, with the complicity and often for the benefit of big businesses. These measures include the corporate social responsibility programs, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, the United Nations Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, among others. Knowledge of these measures can help improve the capacity of the local people to negotiate with the government as well as with the large corporations that are coming to do business in Burma.

Another enhancement in the program is the addition of a module on economic policy reforms that play an important role in facilitating transitional justice in the country as it emerges from its repressive past. This module seeks to extend the coverage of transitional justice from the traditional focus on violations of civil and political rights to inclusion of economic justice and redress of socioeconomic grievances.

Conclusion

Burma is a country in flux. With the government's current stance of opening up to foreign investments and foreign companies lining up to do business inside Burma, economic development is on a precipice. The arrival of foreign companies into the country, particularly those interested in Burma's natural resources, increases the possibilities for more severe cases of economic mismanagement, with the corresponding human rights abuses.

In this regard, having a population aware of the nexus between economic policies and human rights becomes all the more important for the human rights and democratization movements in Burma. This is what ALTSEAN-Burma's ELT program endeavors to do – to equip local Burmese activists with the knowledge, skills, and vocabulary that they need to fight against human rights abuses arising from economic mismanagement. Ultimately, the goal is for ALTSEAN-Burma's ELT program to become redundant, with local Burmese activists having the capacity to conduct the ELT program themselves inside the country.

Endnote

1. For more information on ECDF, visit www.ecdfburma.org/.