

## MYANMAR (BURMA)

## Key themes for Save the Children UK in Myanmar:

- Environmental health
- Trafficked children
- HIV/AIDS
- Education



Children in Myanmar (Burma) face some of the worst poverty in Asia. Government spending on health dropped from 1 per cent of GDP in 1990 to 0.2 per cent in 2000 and public investment in education is also declining. Nearly 75 per cent of families live in rural areas where many homes lack clean water and sanitation facilities, despite the fact that most areas of Myanmar have abundant water resources. Rates of child mortality are high – mainly caused by preventable diseases such as diarrhoea, which claims the lives of some 28,000 children under five every year. An estimated 35 per cent of children under 5 years old suffer from malnutrition.

There are one million internally displaced people in Myanmar and just over 100,000 refugees live in the border areas. Trafficking of children is a big problem, particularly across the eastern border, and many end up being involved in prostitution, begging rackets or other forms of child labour. In addition to the humanitarian crisis that prevails across the country, Myanmar also faces a growing HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The political situation in Myanmar means that it has the lowest international aid allocation of any poor country in the world. Although ostensibly heading towards democracy, in practice the country is led by a junta while opposition leaders are under house arrest. Few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are able to operate within Myanmar and those who do are required to work within strict boundaries.

### SAVE THE CHILDREN IN MYANMAR

In response to the acute lack of basic services in Myanmar, Save the Children has implemented a water and sanitation programme, with community participation as a key principle, but also including hygiene and health education. We have now become a leading NGO in the environmental health sector and are an active member in the national Water & Sanitation Theme Group. This is an important avenue for the advocacy of children's rights and methods of enabling them to take an active part in issues affecting them.

Few agencies work in the field of education, but Save the Children has built up a reputation as a leader in early childhood education within Myanmar. As a result of our influence and pressure, early childhood education now forms a key part of the Government's National Education Plan (the basis for taking education forward during the next three decades) and we have built up a level of trust with the Ministry of Education.

Our other programmes of work focus on the trafficking of children – through our Cross Border Community-based Initiative Against Trafficking in Children – and on HIV/AIDS. We are the lead agency in the NGO Consortium on HIV/AIDS, the largest initiative on this issue in Myanmar.

### KEY AREAS OF WORK

#### Environmental health

The key motivation behind our Environmental Health Programme is that access to safe water, adequate sanitation and education are basic rights of all children. In 2003/04 the Programme was active in eight

townships and implemented 768 community water supply programmes, benefiting more than 100,000 children. In addition, almost 35,000 latrines were built, benefiting some 150,000 children. We have also set up water supply projects in more than 100 schools and provided almost 150 school sanitary latrines. In addition to practical resources, our work also includes health and hygiene education for children and mothers, a vital element in improving health and reducing disease.

In order to meet the level of need, we have had to build latrines and water points as quickly and efficiently as possible. The participation of the local community – including children – has been crucial and we have developed considerable skills and experience in community organisation. Our project staff help the local community to form village water usage groups and committees that manage the planning, implementation and monitoring of the work.

In the course of our work, we also discovered the possibility of arsenic contamination in water supplies. We have raised this and other issues about water quality at a national level, the result of which has been the formation of an inter-agency task force to continuously monitor water quality nationwide.

### **Trafficked children**

During the past 15 years, the borders between China, Myanmar and Thailand have seen the largest flow of migrants in decades. Those from Myanmar make up the largest proportion of this population, many seeking employment opportunities or refuge. There is little general awareness of the needs and concerns of this group – most of whom are young people and children. Many are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse; many become involved in illegal and dangerous work; most have little education; girls may be sold into marriages. It is from among this population that a growing number of children are trafficked from one country to another.

Through our cross-border programme against the trafficking of children, we are breaking new ground to begin tackling some of the problems faced by children and young people who migrate or are trafficked across borders in the highly sensitive Mekong Sub-Region and to reach this otherwise 'unreached' population. Through detailed research, we have developed a good understanding of the issues and now have good partnerships with local communities.

Our aim is to reach children and young people at all stages of the trafficking process and to put pressure on traffickers to stop. Through prevention and awareness-raising campaigns, we educate children and their families about the threat of trafficking. We also teach children how to make informed choices before they migrate to find work and raise their awareness about sexual health and HIV/AIDS. With the active participation of children and young people, we have developed a life-skills curriculum on child trafficking.

For those children who have been trafficked, we act as a link with their homeland and provide them with services such as health, education, welfare and counselling. Where possible, we work to repatriate those who wish to return and help them to reintegrate with their families and communities, often working with partner organisations.

Children and young people themselves play an active part in our work. With them we have developed a life-skills curriculum on child trafficking. We have also set up a children and youth forum. In October 2004 a meeting of the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking (COMMIT) in Yangon, Myanmar received input from young people. During this meeting, in which we also took part, the first regional Memorandum of Understanding on trafficking was agreed upon and a regional plan of action drafted.

### **HIV/AIDS**

Most of the NGOs and other agencies working to combat the rapidly growing AIDS epidemic in Myanmar focus on the adult population. Drawing on our experience and expertise in working with young people in other fields, we focus our work on adolescents – in particular those from ethnic minority communities and those at special risk at major border crossing areas – most of whom have few, if any, reliable sources of information and advice.

A key component of this work is the Adolescent Reproductive Health (ARH) Peer Education Programme, through which we train young people to teach their peers about sexual health and the prevention of HIV/AIDS. In 2004, more than 1,700 ARH workshops had been held, in which almost 47,000 adolescents had taken part, and 8,300 peer educators had been trained. In order to enable as many children as possible

to have access to information, we have also developed education materials in local languages.

In the border areas of Myanmar, our project on youth HIV/AIDS prevention and care is being incorporated within our programme against child trafficking. It aims to reduce the risk of HIV infection among young people vulnerable to trafficking, ensure access to quality home-based care and change policies and discriminatory practice.

We work closely with healthcare professionals, especially midwives, and have a strong partnership with the Myanmar Nurses Association. The success of our initiatives and partnerships has gained us the respect of government and NGO colleagues and enabled us to raise awareness about the importance of adolescent reproductive health. Children and young people involved with our programme have also taken an active part in a number of national, state and district level campaigns to raise awareness about HIV and trafficking issues.

The HIV/AIDS programme is expanding into new townships and, as we develop closer working relations with the NGO Consortium on HIV/AIDS (of which we are the lead agency), our hope is that prevention and care initiatives can reach a much larger group of young people over a wider geographical area.

### Education

Some of Myanmar's poorest and most marginalised children have been reached through Save the Children's early childhood (ECCD) and non-formal (NFE) education programmes. These include children from minority ethnic groups and children with disabilities in northern Shan, Mon and Kayin states.

Children aged under five are at a critical stage in their development. The overall aim of our early years education programme is to facilitate access for children otherwise denied it to safe, stimulating learning environments within which they can increase their intellectual, cognitive and social skills. In order to achieve this most effectively, we have adopted a community-based approach, which means that children and community members have been involved in all stages of developing an educational project in their area. We have trained many teachers in child-friendly and active learning methods of teaching, translated and distributed a number of ECCD materials and been part of a working group to review and revise the ECCD curriculum. Our ECCD programme has also now extended into NFE activities with young people aged between ten and 20.

During 2003/04 we decided to hand over 35 community-based ECCD Centres to their respective communities and to focus on 11 ECCD Centres in three townships, with the aim of improving their efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. Our work in this field has gained a level of trust with the Ministry of Education and we are now developing a pilot project focusing on the transition from ECCD to primary school education.

### MYANMAR AND THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Myanmar ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in 1991. In 1993 it enacted a Child Law in 1993 prohibiting child labour. Myanmar has submitted two reports on the Convention. The second one was considered and adopted in 2004, however, the concept that children have inherent rights is not widely known. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has urged Myanmar to "enhance endeavours to integrate the principles of the Convention into laws and practice".

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