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Towards sustainable livelihoods Vocational training and access to work on the Thai-Burmese border

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About ZOA issue papers

The ZOA issue papers are a series of short papers focusing on current significant educational issues and strategies within the refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border. They are meant to provide brief, organised and coherent information, to generate questions and interest, and to add to public understanding of the challenges and positive outcomes of education in the refugee camps. They are written by researchers and practitioners and edited by an independent editor. The views expressed in the papers do not necessarily represent the views of ZOA Refugee Care Thailand.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the broader picture of livelihoods of Burmese refugees in Thailand as well as to launch new ideas on vocational training and access to work.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation (Chambers and Conway, 1991: 6).

The assets mentioned in the definition comprise not only financial resources, but also natural, physical, social and human capital.

While the focus of this definition is on economic livelihood sustainability, it also touches upon ecological sustainability. The natural resource base should be used in everyone's long term interest, including that of the next generation. Livelihoods should thus not be seen in a vacuum. Instead, it needs to be realised that what is beneficial for a certain household might be harmful for other members of the community. This touches upon a third form of sustainability: social sustainability. This form is achieved when 'social exclusion is minimised and social equity maximised' (DFID, 1999: Section 1.4). A final crucial element of the ability to achieve 'sustainable livelihoods' is increased well-being. Indeed, apart from being able to cope with economic shocks, people attach value to non-material resources as well, such as a sense of control and inclusion, self-esteem, health status, political influence, maintenance of cultural heritage etc. These can all be factors that influence the subjective feeling of well-being (DFID, 1999: Section 2.6).

In this paper, the emphasis is on the economic aspect: improving access to work and the role of human capital in that process. Human capital is essential as it is the basis for the use of all other types of assets and for achieving a positive livelihood outcome. Human capital is the generic term to mean not only life experience, but also education and skills. In response to the question of whether she was active in the community, a refugee responded: "No, I cannot, I am illiterate. But my children are learning how to read and write, so their future will be better" (interview with Karen refugee, Mae La camp, 27/12/2006).

Burmese refugees are aware of the potential of training, as on average, 65% of people surveyed by ZOA Refugee Care wanted to attend a vocational training course, 58% a language course and 47% an awareness raising course (Oh *et al.*, 2006: 141). Livelihoods are, however, thoroughly influenced by the context refugees live in, which implies that many conditions have to be fulfilled before these activities to develop human resources will really lead to a sustainable livelihood with improved resilience to shocks.

This paper will therefore start with an analysis of the context, moving on to practical suggestions for vocational training and related income generation programmes to achieve the goal of improved refugee self-reliance. It touches briefly on the subject of a viable alternative to encampment: the creation of a 'Designated Zone of Residence'. As the focus of this issue paper is on human capital, other vital elements in understanding the livelihoods of the Burmese refugees, such as the importance of social capital in negotiating access to assets, the problematic access to justice or the psychological consequences of protracted encampment for both individuals and communities, will be outside the scope of this paper.

The data for this paper were gathered from a desk study and fieldwork carried out by the author between June 2006 and October 2007 in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces, Thailand, as part of a doctoral project on Burmese refugees' livelihoods in Thailand. Structured interviews were conducted with 140 refugee households, roughly half of them in Mae La and half in Mae Ra Ma Luang camps. Specific care was taken to ensure the diversity of respondents in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion and choice of settlement. On top of that, interviews were conducted with Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), humanitarian personnel, academics, consultants and diplomats.

Livelihoods in camp

As is common in many refugee situations, Burmese refugees in Thailand are required to live in remote camps along the border in order to receive protection and assistance. However, since the rations they receive do not contain fresh fruit, vegetables, meat and other non-food items, refugees are obliged to find alternative sources of income. In my small sample, 17.3% of the respondents did not have any income, while 82.7% had some earnings. For a limited number of people, there are opportunities to work in waged employment in camp for one of the international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), certainly if they have acquired post-secondary education. Wages for employees of NGOs vary depending on the profession and the working experience of the person involved. Teachers for example earn, on average, THB 500 a month, teacher trainers THB 1200, social workers from THB 0 to THB 700 and medical personnel in hospitals from THB 1620 to THB 3000¹. People working for camp management, such as a section leader or a security guard, make between THB 400 and THB 800, while people in CBOs, such as the Karen Women's Organisation, are often unpaid. Other frequently mentioned jobs in camp were: petty trading, shop-keeping (THB 50-120 a day), weaving/sewing (piece work, e.g. THB 220 for a blanket, THB 200 for a lungyi², THB 63 for a Karen shirt), or housework (unpaid). The income from these jobs is supplemented by vegetables grown around the house, animal-raising and (illegal) foraging, fishing and hunting outside camp.

However, most refugees have to leave the camp to find some additional income, where they are subject to arrest and deportation.

We don't have any money. I used to go out to gather some vegetables in the forest, like bamboo shoots, to eat with rice. My husband went out to do daily work, cutting grass for Thai people, but he was arrested two weeks ago. It took him five days to get out of jail, so now we don't dare to leave the camp any more (interview with refugee in Mae La camp, 22/12/2006).

The male members of the family often temporarily or permanently leave the camp in search of work, leading to internal remittances from urban or rural Thai areas to camp. In some families both parents work outside the camp, leaving the children with the grandparents. This family-splitting technique is the most efficient risk diversification strategy for displaced people.

[Refugees] are only able to survive by strategically placing members inside and outside camps, with the most vulnerable ones inside in order to minimise risks and profit from food and non food rations (Horst, 2006: 7).

Without such splitting up strategies, people's diets fit international nutritional standards, but are not varied enough. Anything 'extra' needs to be paid with money earned outside camp. A study by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Ban Kwai refugee camp revealed that over 40% of camp residents were engaged in waged employment outside camp (IRC, 2005). Even if this percentage varies according to the local conditions of each

¹ In October 2007, US\$1 was worth about THB 31.

² A lungyi is a garment worn around the waist in South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is commonly known as a sarong.

camp, it nonetheless gives an idea of how widespread this practice is. It is not surprising then that no less than 24% of the respondents in Mae La and Mae Ra Ma Luang camps identified the lack of security and safe travel as the largest problems they faced in Thailand. The most common (daily) job outside camp is waged employment in farming. Payment varies according to demand and supply: remote camps, such as Mae Ra Ma Luang, are in areas where there is less demand, while large camps like Mae La have an over-supply of labourers, both leading to low wages, namely THB 50 a day in the environs of Mae Ra Ma Luang, and THB 60-80 around Mae La camp³. Given the fact that refugees are treated as 'illegal migrants' once they are outside camp, they are highly vulnerable to exploitation and are in no position to demand the minimum wage. This minimum wage is decided per province and the lowest rate per day in Thailand is THB 145 (TDRI, 2006).

Although the official position of the Royal Thai Government (RTG) is that refugees are not allowed to work, in practice this is tolerated at the local level, benefiting the refugees and the local hosts. Indeed, while the asylum policy is determined largely by the central Thai government, it is the local authorities who are in practice confronted with the refugee presence, and implement this policy according to local circumstances.

At the national level, competing paradigms of national security and economic development make the Thai policy on refugees and migrant work highly variable, reflecting the quickly changing political environment itself. The thread running through Thailand's refugee policy is the concern for national security, which is an important factor in explaining why it is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention of 1951 concerning the Status of Refugees. While in the past this security concern was the threat of communism, today it is primarily with regard to the sensitive border issue and relations with Burma. While trying to improve relations with their neighbour, the conferring of an internationally recognised refugee status on asylum seekers from Burma could be seen as an unfriendly act (Muntarbhorn, 2004: 13-14). Furthermore, Thailand considers itself a special case, plagued by refugee inflows from unstable neighbouring countries for decades with at its height over one million Indochinese refugees in its territory. Therefore, Thailand prefers to have a large decision margin to manage these refugee flows, fearing that adherence to international regulation might force them to receive even more refugees, thereby restricting their national sovereignty and security (Loescher and Milner, 2005). Thai officials thus do not use the term 'refugees' but 'temporarily displaced persons fleeing fighting', which is the definition for the Karen, Karenni, Burmese and individuals of other ethnic groups living in the camps. In 2005, this definition was in theory extended to include people fleeing personal persecution, which is more in line with the 1951 Convention definition. In compliance with the internationally recognised principle of 'non-refoulement', the refugees are entitled to protection and services in camp, as long as the conditions in Burma do not allow repatriation. In Thailand in the meantime, no permanent structures can be built in camp, environmental impact must be minimalised and people are not allowed to leave the camp. Anyone caught outside camp is considered an illegal migrant and is subject to (often unofficial) deportation, regardless of whether or not they carry a UNHCR registration card.

The consequence of this policy and the protracted conflict in Burma is a population that has been warehoused for over 20 years, and is unable to realise its potential. As the former Deputy Prime Minister indicated himself,

70 percent of the refugee humanitarian assistance is allocated for food and non-food items (soap, cooking oil, shelter materials, etc.). To still be feeding a forcibly dependent population after 15 years is tragic; it will be criminal if we are still feeding them after 15 more (as cited in WCRWC, 2006: 2).

³ This is very low, but Thai employees in farming do not make much money either, with the average wage per month standing at THB 2819 (TDRI, 2006).

The only way forward is to invest in programmes working towards sustainable livelihoods, namely education, vocational training and some form of micro-finance. In order to achieve sustainable livelihoods however, the goal should not be to increase the ability of refugees to purchase additional food items, but rather to be self-reliant so that food rations would eventually become unnecessary for all but the most vulnerable. The best way to achieve this objective is through vocational training that can lead to work in the host country.

Vocational education is likely to be more effective in fostering economic self-reliance than income-generating projects. In short-term emergencies refugees may rely on the skills they brought from their country of origin; in protracted refugee situations, however, there is a new generation to be considered of refugees growing up in the host country (Kuhlman, 2002: 41).

The remainder of this paper will thus focus on the way vocational training could best be organised in order to achieve the objective of refugee self-reliance in the long term, bearing in mind that there is only so much that training can do in the absence of assured refugee rights.

Vocational training courses and access to work

In order to engage in capacity building and to improve human capital, training of all kinds can be given, one of which will be discussed here: vocational training. The International Labour Organisation defines vocational training as follows:

Vocational training is an activity directed to identifying and developing human capabilities for a productive and satisfying working life. [...] those who take part in vocational training activities should be able to understand and, individually or collectively, to influence working conditions and the social environment (Casanova, 2003: 10).

Casanova goes on to explain that this entails several elements: 1) it is an educational activity, 2) the training has both theoretical and practical components but with a greater emphasis on the practical side than other types of education, and 3) the training also prepares people to get involved in labour relations. For the purpose of this paper, the term vocational training will be used to mean 'an educational activity focused on practical skills training in preparation for a particular trade or job'.

The challenge for livelihood support in the form of vocational training (VT) is to teach skills that have the potential for income generation. The most important problem for the current VT programmes is the fact that in the past these were focused on the option of repatriation, which was envisioned as the best durable solution by the international community, Thailand and most of the refugees. However, repatriation has not occurred and there are no legal employment options in Thailand, nor is the training adapted to the requirements of the local labour market. Therefore the newly acquired skills are hardly ever put into practice once the training is completed. The VT programmes do, nevertheless, serve certain social goals such as providing people with educational goals, distraction⁴ and promoting community cohesion.

⁴ Editor's note: The VT programmes were set up to provide trainees with skills which would be useful upon repatriation. Also, refugees' engagement in VT programmes is more than a distraction – it creates opportunities for creating mental and physical wellbeing.

The lack of progress in conflict resolution in Burma, however, led to a change in the position of the previous Thai government regarding burden sharing through resettlement programmes and capacity building of the refugees while in Thailand. This major shift in thinking requires a different focus for the VT courses. Burmese refugees need to learn skills that are useful for income generation in Thailand, as well as in preparation for the future, whether that involves resettlement or repatriation. As the conditions in the Thai districts, Karen State and certainly in resettlement countries are very different, it is particularly difficult to lay out VT courses that will be of value for income generation in all three possibilities. The single most important issue for people who have applied for resettlement is language training, while people staying in camp need training in useful skills for Thailand and Burma. VT thus needs to be balanced between training for independence within the refugee situation and training for repatriation and reconstruction.

The following sections will discuss current vocational training courses and initiatives that could be taken to improve access to work in the current context of encampment. The paper ends with a section on the importance of legal access to work outside camp and the corresponding benefits to refugees and Thais, followed by initiatives that could be taken if the present policy changes.

Current vocational training courses: what is available?

Currently, vocational training is provided by both NGOs and CBOs. The NGOs providing VT courses are ZOA Refugee Care (ZOA), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), Catholic Organization for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR), American Refugee Committee (ARC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC). CBOs such as the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) and the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) provide some training as well. The courses last between one week and three years (Oh *et al.*, 2006: 72-73; Oh and Parkdeekhunthum, 2007: 32-39). The largest provider of VT in the seven predominantly Karen populated camps is ZOA. The kinds of courses and the numbers of people trained in the period 2003-2006 can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 | Number of trainees in the ZOA Vocational Training Programme 2003 to 2006

Training course	2003	2004	2005	2006		Total
	Total	Total	Total	Male	Female	
Agriculture	121	140	147	167	100	267
Animal raising	16	0	0	62	10	88
Auto Mechanic	105	156	260	297	2	299
Bakery Cooking	120	312	342	126	195	321
Basket Weaving	18	19	39	10	0	10
Black-smith	10	15	37	28	0	28
Carpentry	10	8	24	31	0	31
Computer Operation	0	0	440	628	410	1038
First Aid	47	52	0	0	0	0
Goat raising	0	0	27	0	0	0
Mini-hydro repair & maintenance	0	0	0	0	0	0
Handicraft	13	0	0	0	0	0
Knitting	18	78	85	0	128	128
Music	180	238	343	133	107	240
Radio Mechanics	35	22	79	35	0	35
Sewing	122	335	497	24	370	394
Stove Making	18	17	30	41	25	66
Tin-smith	15	32	53	29	1	30
Typing	25	177	0	0	0	0
Weaving - see TBBC	0	33	32	8	17	25
Fish Breeding - see ARC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fish Raising - see ARC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	857	1634	2435	1619	1365	2984

Source: ZOA internal documents December 2007

The most popular courses by far are the computer, sewing, bakery, auto-mechanic and agriculture training. Weaving and sewing courses are also provided by the KWO, TBBC and WEAVE. Training in the setting up of kitchen gardens has been organised through TBBC's Community Agriculture and Nutrition (CAN) project for 7360 people since 2000 (Oh and Parkdeekhunthum, 2007: 27), while COERR has been giving similar training to about 1000 people yearly since 1999, but primarily to 'Extremely Vulnerable Individuals' (EVIs). COERR also gives training in soap and candle-making to EVIs and widows (interview at COERR Office Mae Sot, 12/10/2007). Micro-enterprise development has been initiated by ARC in three camps, while in the camps predominantly populated by Karenni refugees, IRC and JRS are the main facilitators of VT. The goals of these different programmes vary, however, from income generation to improving the food basket to merely teaching new skills.

At present there are some opportunities for trainees who have successfully completed a course to gain some work experience. For example, trainees from the CAN project receive fencing, tools, seeds, trees and livestock to get started. Other opportunities to practise newly-acquired agricultural skills are available in the COERR Demonstration gardens, as well as in the ZOA livelihoods pilot project in Mae La camp (see below). For opportunities to practise the skills acquired in non-agricultural training courses,

workshops have been established in some camps, where former trainees can use their skills in blacksmithing (Mae Ra Ma Luang), repairing electrical devices (Mae La), repairing cars (Tham Hin), and preparing food in restaurants (ZOA, 2007: 15-16). Additionally, former trainees produce some items for the relief programme, namely stoves for the TBBC (Mae Ra Ma Luang) and clothes for the TBBC, ARC and ZOA. There are also some cases of self-employment, such as refugees opening up a restaurant after baking training or graduates of sewing courses buying a sewing machine and setting up small tailoring businesses (Mae La).

Improving livelihoods in the current context of encampment

In general, however, the majority of the refugees are unable to use their potential due to the lack of access to work both inside and outside camp. Therefore, initiatives where former trainees can put into practice what they have learned should be extended.

As most refugees are farmers, many families encounter a large income gap during the agricultural off-season. The challenge would thus be to provide them with alternatives during that season. The production of items for the relief programme could be extended to other products such as detergent, soap, blankets, sleeping mats, candles, etc. This initiative would, of course, depend on NGOs to deliver the raw materials, and to control the quality of the product. For the relief items that are produced within the homes, the cost of the tools could be deducted monthly from the payment for the work done. Another useful skill in camp and upon repatriation is prosthetics making, as the conflict-affected areas in Burma have led to a considerable number of mine victims. Training in this technical craft could be expanded in cooperation with Handicap International.

Additionally, this needs to be combined with enterprise-based training. One possibility is to place trainees as apprentices with skilled workers inside camp and to provide incentives (e.g. tools or follow-up training) to the master craftsmen and craftswomen to ensure that the training is provided (Lyby, 2001: 240). In this way, apprentices can gain a taste of the real life skills needed in a small business, from improvising tools, materials and spare parts, to dealing with suppliers and customers. The role of NGOs in this activity would be to set up a regulating body in each camp linking the supply and demand of labour. This 'employment desk' would facilitate contact between refugees who have successfully completed their course and skilled craftsmen and craftswomen inside camp, as well as negotiate contracts and report abuses by the employer. The employment desk could be a part of the current VT committees, or could be a separate body. Coordination of this project across the different camps could be in the hands of an experienced organisation, such as the Federation of Trade Unions - Burma or the IRC.

While many people will look for waged employment, other people might be more interested in setting up their own small businesses. They should be assisted as well, preferably after they have finished their apprenticeship. Given that these programmes need to lead to self-reliance, those selected need to be provided with training in administrative, marketing and finance skills to set up small businesses. They could then be assisted with raw materials (for a small cost) or credit for start-up in the form of loans (micro-credit principle).

A way to both increase access to financial capital and give an impetus to small businesses would be to facilitate 'Rotating Savings and Credit Associations' (ROSCAs), also called 'Village Saving and Loan Associations' (VSLAs). The basic idea is that small self-organised groups put money together in a fund, out of which everybody may borrow to invest (but not all at the same time). People need to present their business project and the group decides who gets a loan. Non-borrowing members benefit from the interest paid for the loans. The regular savings contributions are deposited with an end date in mind (usually 8-12 months). At that point, the total fund, or part of it, is proportionally

distributed to the members, depending on how much they put into the fund. They can then use their money based on self-identified needs. NGOs could monitor the ROSCAs until the first pay-out, to verify whether the system works properly. But apart from initial training and monitoring in the first cycle, the role of NGOs should be minimal. It is essential that the implementation is left in refugee hands, as peer pressure is more likely to make members repay their loans than an anonymous international organisation. In this way, refugees would be less dependent on their current savings in the form of pigs and gold, improving both self-reliance and community-building: "Experience in Africa has shown that more than 95% of Associations continue to operate independently once their formal training relationship to the implementing organisation comes to an end" (Allen and Waterfield, 2006). In this respect, the pilot project from ARC in Nu Po camp is noteworthy, as they are setting up VSLAs.

An alternative to ROSCAs would be micro-finance. Small loans could be provided to the refugees by an NGO experienced in micro-finance or by branches of Thai banks that are used to dealing with rural Thais (and thus with lending small amounts). While micro-finance projects could ensure growth in small businesses and an improvement of human security, they also have a sustainability factor in the context of return to the home country, as they contribute to the establishment of a strong credit culture. The most common problem associated with micro-finance for refugees is low repayment rates, which endangers the sustainability of projects. Thus, before setting up a micro-finance programme, certain preconditions have to be fulfilled, such as a minimum degree of stability and safety, a re-emergence of market activities and a minimum guaranteed stay of the refugees (e.g. 18 months) to repay the loans⁵. Other ways of improving repayment rates is additional business training, thorough monitoring, and only selecting people with a strong entrepreneurial drive, based on the rationale that their activities have more chances of succeeding. If the agency has insufficient experience in micro-finance activities, in-kind loans are considered a better alternative to monetary loans. In any case, it is best to separate the implementing agencies and staff who deliver emergency aid from the ones carrying out micro-finance activities, to ensure that the refugees are better able to distinguish between free humanitarian aid and loans that need to be repaid (Jacobsen, 2003, 2005).

Essential elements in these self-employment schemes are: having reliable access to markets and the cooperation of the host government, as the legal right to work needs to be ensured. Both factors are currently problematic. While the camps are at present an enlargement of the consumer base for Thai suppliers, the reverse is not true. There is not enough money circulating in camp to sustain many small businesses. A market created close to the camp where goods can be bought and sold by both refugees and local Thais would help to address this. A substitute for this market would be to allow people in Thai villages close by to buy goods in camp. This would be to the advantage of both the refugees and the local Thais, as it is difficult to obtain certain products in these remote areas, while camp shops have contacts with Thai vendors in town and across the border. In this intermediate approach, refugees would be allowed to travel within a limited space around the camp, while Thais would be allowed into camp for commercial reasons, treating the camps more like 'hill-tribe'⁶ villages'. Without this enlarged market, the number of people who will become self-reliant on the basis of a small business will be minimal. The second factor, legal access to work, is the point discussed in the following section.

⁵ In this context, people who have applied for resettlement would not be able to participate in micro-finance projects. They would, however, be able to join a ROSCA group, depending on the time frame that the group has.

⁶ Editor's note: This is a suggestion put forward by the author. It is not endorsed by ZOA Refugee Care as the status of villagers from rural or isolated villages in terms of access to livelihoods can also be a challenging one. Also, ZOA wishes to distance itself from this perspective as the lack of citizenship and legal rights of 'hill-tribe villagers' is a highly political issue that is being discussed by appropriate agencies working in such communities.

Improving access to work outside camp

To really achieve the objective of sustainable livelihoods, a more rights-based approach to livelihoods is urgently needed, even if working towards refugee legal status and livelihood rights is much more difficult than providing care and maintenance programmes. Certainly, legal access to work outside camp is essential. The RTG, like many other host governments, is hesitant to grant refugees access to work because of the potential creation of a pull factor from across the border and the assumed lack of control over the refugees.

The fact of the matter is that the push factors are far more important in this case than pull factors and that refugees cannot be strictly contained in the camps either. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of Burmese 'migrants' are already working in Thailand. Legal rights to work will ensure that more refugee resources will be used in favour of both the refugees and the host country. Indeed, the vocational training programmes could expand economic opportunities for all: enlarging the local skilled labour force, which could lead to local expansion in agriculture and industry, while the wages paid would lead to an increase of the consumer base and as such to a gain in the profits of local businesses. Local Thais would also benefit from several services available to the refugees, ranging from health services, access to the camp markets and vocational training courses, as long as this is feasible for the NGOs involved.

On a social level, this would have a positive impact as well.

Refugees' pursuit of livelihoods can increase human security because economic activities help to recreate social and economic interdependence within and between communities, and can restore social networks based on the exchange of labour, assets and food (Jacobsen, 2002: 95).

Regarding the control of refugees working outside camps, the employment desk suggested above could cooperate with Thai enforcement personnel by sharing information on the whereabouts of the refugees employed through them. The incentive for employers to hire refugees instead of illegal migrant workers lies in the fact that these are trained workers who are legally employed, diminishing both their own risk of arrest and/or fines and losing reliable staff through deportation. Once this step of work for refugees outside camp has been taken, it would be beneficial to also involve Thai people in the employment desk, to improve communication between the different stakeholders.

An essential element from the perspective of the refugees would be that their protection is ensured outside camp, by making clear to law enforcement personnel that working papers, in combination with their UNHCR card, forbid deportation. Only in that way can their improved human capital lead to an increase in financial capital, and, in the longer term, to increased livelihood resilience.

Legal access to employment outside camp has implications on training. The most widespread skills already present in the refugee population are agricultural skills - skills that are requested by employers in Thailand and are useful upon repatriation. Although many people, with the exception of the younger generation born in camp, have experience in farming, many only have knowledge of traditional techniques, such as slash-and-burn agriculture. Additional skills in agriculture, animal husbandry and fish-breeding should thus be the first priority for vocational training courses. Training in these skills necessarily requires access to land, which is currently largely insufficient in all camps. In this respect, the current pilot activity carried out by ZOA could be trend-setting, in which land is being leased from the Thai Forestry Department near Mae La camp for training in agricultural skills, attended by 80 camp residents and it includes support for 40 local Thais from three villages. The land will provide the refugees with an opportunity to practise their newly acquired skills even if it is not large enough to make them self-reliant.

The content of other training programmes would depend on the needs of the local labour market and the potential use-value upon repatriation. For Tak province for example, training in textile manufacturing and solar panel repair as well as furniture-, ceramic- and jewellery-making would be advisable. Skills in construction such as carpentry, masonry, tiling or even road-making could be useful for employment in (public) infrastructure works both in Thailand and for future reconstruction in the conflict-affected areas in Burma.

The most efficient approach to legalising refugee labour would be to combine access to work with language training, which would be in line with the global self-reliance strategy advocated by the UNHCR. Without Thai language skills, the refugee population is considerably disadvantaged in the local labour market, and contact with the local Thai population will continue to be minimal. In fact, a quarter of the respondents of the ZOA survey were interested in attending a Thai language course (Oh *et al.*, 2006).

With the focus on income generation however, we are confronted with a dilemma: should training be provided to sustain the current focus on agriculture, just because the largest economic sector in Burma in terms of employment is still the primary sector? Or should the younger generation be prepared for a more technologically advanced future, where the secondary and certainly the tertiary sector will become increasingly important? The answer is that we need both. National reconstruction will also require skills that are useful for providing services, such as secretarial, office, bookkeeping, typing and computer skills. Even if these do not currently lead to waged employment, computer skills are indispensable for the younger generation in the modern world. The same logic can be applied to English language training.

Conclusion

In this paper, the livelihoods of Burmese refugees in Thailand were discussed, accompanied by recommendations on how to improve access to work and what role vocational training can play in working towards sustainable livelihoods. In the current context of encampment, the production of items for the relief programme could be extended, as well as combining group-based training with enterprise-based training to give trainees the opportunity to practise newly-acquired skills. The establishment of an 'employment desk' to regulate supply and demand of labour was proposed. The set-up of small businesses could be stimulated by the creation of ROSCAs or micro-finance projects. The implications of these ideas in terms of training were set out.

However, before these training efforts and projects can lead to sustainable livelihoods with improved resilience to shocks, the livelihoods context must change. Refugees need legal access to work, freedom of movement and access to markets to sell their products. The RTG could be convinced to allow these changes, if local Thais benefit as well. If refugees are no longer dependent on food rations as a result of access to work and freedom of movement, their self-reliance and human security will substantially increase. In that case, parallel services in the camps could be reduced, in favour of improving existing Thai services in health, education and finance, accessible to both the Thai and refugee populations. Many of the provinces along the Thai-Burmese border are in fact among the least developed in the whole of Thailand (UNDP, 2007), thus improving services would clearly be to the advantage of Thai nationals as well. A viable alternative to encampment would thus be to allow freedom of movement and access to work in a 'Designated Zone of Residence' (Jacobsen, 2005), perhaps in all the border provinces, while travel beyond this zone would be possible with permission. This combines a rights-based approach with the concern for regional development. The refugees would have their economic and social rights assured, while at the same time Thai services would be improved for both refugees and the host communities in the zone. It would thus be a more holistic and long term 'durable solution' to the advantage of both refugees and local Thais.

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ZOA Refugee Care is a Netherlands-based NGO established in 1973. It provides support to refugees, displaced people and victims of natural disasters. ZOA works in various countries in Asia and Africa. At the moment, it implements projects in Afghanistan, Angola, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Thailand and Uganda. Since 1984, ZOA has been working with Burmese refugees living in camp settlements in Thailand. Currently, ZOA implements projects in seven refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border in the areas of general education, vocational training, and food and shelter.

Since 1997, ZOA has been providing support to Burmese refugees in Thailand to enable them to manage and improve their own community education system. This support is provided through the Karen Education Project (KEP), the fourth phase of which started in January 2006. The main intervention areas of KEP are in-service teacher training and support, curriculum and textbook development, institutional capacity building, community development, and the provision of operational services, such as school construction, payment of teacher subsidies and the provision of school supplies. The challenge for the future will be to assist the further improvement of the quality of education and to ensure sustainability of project interventions in a protracted refugee situation, with a considerable degree of uncertainty about future scenarios for the refugees.

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