**Voice of Inclusion for Monastic Schools**

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**Purpose**

This paper aims to describe my experience as a VSO international volunteer in Myanmar with the Monastic Education Development Group (MEDG). It draws primarily on the role and challenges of MEDG- a faith-based non-government organisation that aims to improve the standard of education delivered through monastic schools and provide appropriate inclusive education particularly to the most disadvantaged children: children living in poverty, linguistic minority children, children in remote areas, children affected by conflicts and disabled children. Monastic schools are the second largest provider of basic education in the country that cater particularly to poor children, are free of charge such as enrolment fees and exist in many rural regions of Myanmar.

The idea to write this paper came from prior and shared conviction that education is the most valuable tool that enables an individual to seize opportunities that life offers. As Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. I joined MEDG as a VSO Volunteer in August of 2016 at a time in which the basic design for their education projects were solidified. At the same time MEDG was beginning to hire and develop the capability of its staff and explore potential partnerships with different international donors.

I write in the voice of a reflective practitioner to allow the essence of my experience to emerge from journal writing, observation and interactions with MEDG. Trying to bring together a large picture about monastic education as complex as Myanmar is an ambitious undertaking and is not the ultimate objective of this paper. An appreciation of the current situation of MEDG could serve as a springboard to help create awareness, support and understanding of the stages that many education systems must work through when recovering from a prolonged period of neglect. In short, this paper has three objectives: first, to tell the story of MEDG who as I have known contribute their time, energy and creativity in the service of a pioneering mission in which they strongly believe; second, to give others the chance to learn from their challenges just as much from their initial achievements; and third, to inspire the readers potentially to act and support MEDG in advancing their social cause.

The story begins by looking at a brief context of Myanmar’s education system. It moves on with an overview of the monastic school, its importance in Myanmar and its deep connection with the civil society and the Sangha (*simply understood as the Buddhist monastic order*). Then the story explores the internal and external challenges of MEDG to improve the quality of the monastic education system, develop its own organisation’s capability and sustain partnerships with different donors. The conclusion draws together these themes toward an understanding about MEDG and sketches some questions for future inquiry and possible support to help bring inclusive education in Myanmar.

**The Setting**: *Experiential context.*

I came to MEDG with corporate experience in human resources from local and multinational companies, not as an educator. I was an outsider to say the least, amongst the staff who are mostly locale nationals, teachers and school administrators. I had very little knowledge of MEDG and the work they do. After a few weeks of orientation however, including site visits to monastic schools and meeting with Senior Monks in northern and southern Shan States, I appreciated the scope and social impact MEDG could achieve.

I was excited to take on a noble role although with the daunting challenges of how an HR practitioner would be able to contribute to this organisation where the context was totally outside of my self-imposed corporate world, geography, political environment and discipline. As a volunteer with a completely different background I was very anxious, not knowing how to interact with them and whether my professional knowledge would fit in. This situation inspired me to learn more about the historical context of education in Myanmar, monastic schools and the reasons why this group of young individuals have dedicated their time to MEDG.

MEDG is one big “family” of friends, classmates and relatives. Majority of the staff were former monastic school teachers or school administrators who completed their primary and high school education from Phaung Daw Oo Monastic High School[[1]](#footnote-1). Almost all of them lived in the school dormitories or within the school compound – grew up there and have known each other for years. Most of their life experiences were embedded within a secure environment of monastic schools, and revolve around Buddhist culture and traditions. For example, some of the male staff had been monks once in their lifetime.

The stories the staff shared with me proved their unquestionable loyalty to monastic school and commitment to help their country. One Project Manager shared that “getting hundreds of children back to school for the future of her country” inspires her to work for MEDG. A lifetime attitude of generosity, obedience and “familial” relationships was transparent which at some point also became a weakness for MEDG’s ability to deliver its commitments. A few staff have had the opportunity to attend scholarships abroad that helped them develop a different perspective of their country and the world outside of monastic school.

Within the first three months of my work with MEDG, particularly with human resources and leadership teams, it became clear to me their ambitious goals could be overwhelming for lack of human development capability compounded by lack of knowledge in some important roles. The staff learn as they accomplish the demands of daily roles, which oftentimes affect the outcome of their work. Without any funding except for a conviction to help the monastic schools, the risks they took to get their projects off the ground in the early stages defined who they are as an organisation. Their approach was quite radical and unproven. The announcements made about goals and impact were bold. As time went on I was impressed with the selfless dedication of the staff and other network of consultants and volunteers who helped establish the organisation. I shared the purpose of their existence and felt the strain of their energy. What strikes me most is to see how engaged this team is in their desire to make a difference in the world.

In the spirit of my continued interest in diversity and inclusion research, I place this short paper within the context of my reflections as a VSO volunteer but does not necessarily represent the views of the organisation. It is my hope that this piece of work serves as an ongoing reminder and inspiration for others to reflect how they could be involved to help MEDG sustain its work.

**Research Methodology:** *From the Outside Looking In.*

This research is a small step to share my unique experience of volunteering with MEDG in Myanmar. Specifically, it shares the knowledge, understanding and interpretations I gained about the role and challenges of MEDG in providing access to education for disadvantaged children and improving the standard of education delivered through monastic schools. This paper reflects on what insights or lessons might be of value to share, or already held, in common with those challenging organisational norms and practices in international development.

Reflective writing is associated with phenomenological approaches that can be applied to a single case with serendipitous or deliberately selected samples (Stan, 1999). Perhaps the former scenario would be more relevant in this case to make visible the “frame” of this short paper and start from a perspective free of hypothesis or pre-conceptions.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach and a research method (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007; van Manen, 1990) that stems from the Greek words “pheninoemn” meaning appearance and “logos” meaning reason. As a philosophy, phenomenology is “a radical beginning, a return to philosophical questioning, a way to see the world anew as it really is rather than as it is constructed” (Caelli, 2000, p371). As a research method, phenomenology is “the study of essences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 p. vii). Essences are the essential elements of a phenomenon, those things which make it recognizable as such (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology does not look for cause-effect relationships nor does it seek to generalize (Porter, 1999). It is a process of observing and analysing the things themselves in a new way. “A good phenomenological text has the effect of making us suddenly see‟ something in a manner that enriches our understanding of everyday life experience” (van Manen, 1997).

Phenomenology does not attempt to generalize or create theory, rather it allows the essence of the experience to emerge from the data. It does not seek to solve problems but rather highlights what makes an experience unique. Interpretation of experiences creates a constant awareness of what it means to be human and aids in the quest to reach our full humanity (Stan, 1999). It focuses on the nature of experience from the point of view of the person experiencing the phenomenon (known as "lived experience") and examines the qualities or essence of an experience through interviews, stories, or observations with people who are having the experience of the researcher's interest (Connelly,2010).  In effect, phenomenology reveals the lifeworld of my work as a VSO Volunteer through language. Writing is an integral component of the phenomenological process to allow the discovery of memories and create a deeper meaning than what is written.

Epistemologically, phenomenological research is based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity that emphasises the importance of personal perspectives. It uses inductive research methods to comprehend universally-lived experiences (van Manen, 1990) where a phenomenological researcher acknowledges the “whole might be quite different than the sum of its parts” (Omery, 1983). The researcher analyses and interprets lived experiences to find essential themes, and the themes taken together allow the meaning of the experience to emerge (van Manen, 1990).

A phenomenological-based research utilizes minimum structure and maximum depth (Stan, 1999) since it uses a variety of methods such as interviews, conversation and participant observation. Somehow it is constrained by the time and opportunities to keep focus on the research issue. Hence, building a good rapport and empathy is critical to obtain from the reader understanding of depth of information particularly on the issues where the researcher has a personal stake.

Although this approach could be challenged on structural or normative assumptions, it essentially brings to the fore interpretations and linkages to personal experience or even to common-sense opinions of the author. Informed speculation can also be included here, provided it is clear what findings are being discussed and what assertions and assumptions are being made. This would help the reader work through from the findings what theories helped the researcher arrive/d at his or her interpretations.

The problem with phenomenological research is the large quantity of notes, journals and other records that should be analysed. In a small-scale and short-term assignment described in this paper an alternative and useful way is to identify specific headings and different themes to complete the story. It is important to note that this paper is not a quantitative research that uses parameters to test the validity of findings and results. Data are generally qualitative indicating the presence of the factors and their effects on the situation being described and tentatively suggesting their extent in relation to the time and place where the research was conducted.

**Myanmar Buddhist Monastic Education**: *Why change should happen.*

Monastic education dates back as early as the 11th century during the time of King Anawrahta (Thu, 2016) and plays a significant role in the protection of the rich Buddhist heritage. In its pure and traditional form, monastic education is characterised by non-formal and lifelong learning that represent the unity of life and religion. Kings demonstrated their concern for monastic learning through detailed and regular censuses that showed impressive literacy rates among their subjects (Cheeseman, 2003).

“*Monastic education* refers to a nation-wide network of schools run by monasteries and nunneries that have long provided free education to girls and boys of all backgrounds, mostly attracting students from poor, ethnic and migrant communities” (Myanmar Education Consortium Program Strategy, 2016). The word for ‘school’ and ‘monastery’ in Myanmar is identical and only contemporary adjectival prefixes can distinguish the two. The word for education is also a product of the monasteries derived from a ‘Pali’ word that connects learning, wisdom and knowledge (Cheeseman, 2003).

For many centuries, the Sangha was the highest depository of learning, and had an obligation to extend its instruction to the lay people. According to Cheeseman (2003 p.49) “both the state and the Sangha benefited from monastic schooling”. The Monastic school was an explicit link between people and their religion and by extension their state. It transmitted standardised cultural and intellectual matter across all sectors of the society, instilled a value of discipline and reinforced a respect for tradition and hierarchy. It also mandated community participation, support and is highly valued. Technically education was free as the Sangha relied primarily upon local communities for its needs. It was a voluntary village-based collective undertaking.

The problem regarding education that emerged in Myanmar is particularly interesting. Before 1962 Myanmar prided itself with the level of its education. For many years that neighbouring Asian countries saw Myanmar as an example (Lorch,2007). However, in past decades, the extreme authoritarian government significantly eroded the standard of education, especially for the very poor. The military dictatorship had let institutions decay and perpetuated inadequate resources rather than build a strong education system. The standard of education significantly deteriorated and became highly ineffective after decades of underinvestment and civil strife. One could question why education was used as a political tool. As in most dictatorships, the military government was keen to suppressed education largely because of the belief that an “independent and critical” way of thinking was a direct challenge to them.

“The erosion is characterised not only by lack of access to and the quality of education but by a system that suppresses critical thinking and discourages creativity” (U Nayaka,2016). Furthermore, Hayden and Martin (2013) outlined the weakened state of Myanmar’s education system in the areas of financial support, governance, school management, pedagogy, equity and quality. These weaknesses can be observed in different forms and across all schools, including monastic schools. Although education markedly declined during the military government, the monastic schools continued to fill the void for the poorer sections of the society.

Monastic schools became part of the solution to provide at least the basic education especially for disadvantaged children even though they did not receive government support. The village monastery served as an education centre making monastic schools an integral part of the communities in which they are located. The centre engaged cultural and religious activities as well as helped decrease the rate of illiteracy. At that time, the form of teaching was considered fundamentally different from the formal secular education system. However, in the present-day Myanmar, MEDG is incorporating the pedagogy and content of the formal education system into some of its monastic schools.

For the first time in history in 2013, the government pledged financial support to monastic schools across the country primarily as assistance towards teachers’ salaries. However much more needs to be done. Most monastic schools receive very little government support and rely on donations, community support and a small amount of income generated from school projects to stay viable. Facilities are very basic. Sanitation and hygiene facilities in many schools are inadequate. With weak management and shortage of teaching materials and teachers, the proportion of students who remain in school after enrollment is low at fifty percent.

Although the government has recently begun to support the salaries of teachers, resources remained limited and many teachers work as volunteers (Burnet Institute Myanmar & MEDG 2014). Moreover, teachers are reluctant to teach, especially in rural areas, as they do not receive adequate salaries. These include cases in which there is a school building but there are no teachers. Schoolbooks and curricula tend to be outdated. Teachers are mostly poorly trained and teaching methods tend to rely on rote learning. In some areas within the country, the government provides compulsory education, however school entrance fees are still collected informally. Hence, education becomes an option only for those who can afford to send their children to government schools. Due to impoverished conditions, the parents have limited resources for the education of their children since food security is the priority of the family (Thu 2016).

The monastic education system in Myanmar operates over 1,600 schools catering for almost 300,000 children. Monastic schools are largely autonomous; however, they coordinate through a committee system at township, state/region and national level. The committees are composed of township education officers and are linked, through the respective committees to state, region and national levels of oversight.

Some monastic schools receive/d funds, donations and volunteers but this happens largely on an individual basis. So far, the role of international donor community in promoting monastic education has been limited and fragmented, except for one notable exception – the Phaung Daw Oo Monastic High School where donations are usually institutionalised. Despite the small amount of grants and donations received by monastic schools, it is worthwhile to note that the quality of education continues to show some deficiencies. For instance, during my visit to Northern and Southern Shan States it was evident that many monastic schools faced even more economic hardships such as poor infrastructure for classrooms and overcrowded dormitories. There are monastic schools that cater to girls and teach vocational skills. There are also monastic schools that serve as orphanages even though not all the children they care for are Buddhist.

What does this scenario suggest in terms of the overall contribution of monastic schools in the education sector? While monastic schools provide valuable stop-gap solutions to educational issues, they lack the capabilities necessary to effectively act as substitutes for a functioning state-run education system. They cannot bridge the quality gap, and the standard of teaching is sometimes inadequate. They are often located in areas where the government system does not reach. Volunteer teachers are often poorly trained and rely on outdated methods. In some locations especially in ethnic areas, delivering education remains a big challenge. These problems are the primary reasons why MEDG was formed.

**Monastic Education Development Group**: *Ensuring learning happens in monastic school.*

The Monastic Education Development Group (MEDG) is composed of a group of senior monks elected by their peers and assisted by a team of education and program management specialists. According to U Nayaka (2016) [[2]](#footnote-2), “the organisation helps not only the monastic school education development but also to the Myanmar education reform processes”. Its main role has been providing monastic school training on school management and administration, teacher core competencies and school health. It has also provided small grants for the improvement of school facilities.

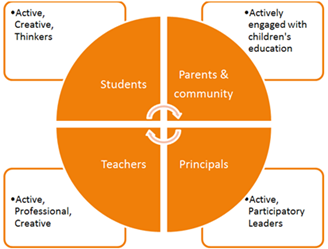
As of the date of this writing, MEDG has 110 staff mostly composed of Teacher Trainers and School System Trainers. Majority of MEDG staff were hired from Phaung Daw Oo, the most well-known monastic school in Myanmar and the rest came from other monastic schools. It is a management practice in MEDG to hire its staff from monastic schools, as employment in MEDG becomes their opportunity for personal and professional development. During their employment with MEDG the staff maintain their relationship with their parent monastic schools through a uniform percentage voluntary donation of thirty percent from their monthly salary. Once the projects for which staff were hired have been completed, the staff are expected to return to their parent monastic schools.

MEDG takes an active and leading role in the development of National Level quality education systems and promotion of basic minimum standards for all Monastic Schools in Myanmar. They collaborate with government, local and international NGOs and donors to mobilize support for the development of Monastic Schools, to establish professional standards and training, and to promote teachers’ capacity to deliver a creative and child centred approach. MEDG leads the development of sustainable and systematic reform of Monastic Schools and prioritizes the role of schools in promoting access to quality education and responsible citizenship.

MEDG is registered with the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs instead of the Ministry of Education. Monastic schools are not religious schools but act like low-cost/ no-cost private schools, providing the national curriculum often to the most disadvantaged children. In Myanmar culture, monks themselves play an influential role in communities, an intrinsic strength to enabling effective community level development. Education is a vital component of this and MEDG aims to support a network of over 1,600 monastic schools across the country catering to around 300,000 children.

*Learning by Doing.*

At the core of MEDG’s strategies is a framework which illustrates a strong link and collaboration with many actors: the students, parents and community, teachers and principals. Participation is high on the agenda and the role of these actors is a vital component of what MEDG does. The implication is that there is a cooperative investment of time, resources, materials and funding to share the benefits of the outcome to all partners - a testament of community collaboration in Myanmar culture.



MEDG employs two approaches to make schools more accessible and interesting for out of school children. The first approach is a Face to Face Teaching Programs which will benefit 480 schools within the next three years. This includes teacher training and mentoring, school administration training and system deployment support and access to small grants. The out of school children will be enrolled back into mainstream schools as well as have access to non-formal education classes using government approved Non-Formal Primary Equivalency Program (NFPE) at different times of the day to fit in with their work and other life commitments.

The second approach is a ground-breaking step for monastic education in Myanmar. MEDG has signed a partnership with Telenor to connect 40 pilot schools to the internet and will develop innovative E-Learning activities to reach children/youth who are out of school. ‘Tech’ classrooms will be set up which include computers, a camera and microphone, a projector and hand-held devices. Digital resources will be provided and special teaching programs will be delivered using this technology from studio based teachers in Mandalay. Students will be able to learn from the studio teacher and supported by a facilitator in the classroom as well as have access to a wide range of on-line self-directed learning materials.

In support of these strategies are multiple activities were happening almost at the same time in different locations: training of teachers and principals, building school capacity, advocacy and networking, curriculum development/ E-Learning, leadership and administration training and education administration systems training and installation of hardware and software. For the past eight months, MEDG pulled through all these activities without recourse.

In terms of accomplishments since 2011, MEDG had delivered the following:

* Trained 2,490 trained teachers from 655 schools between 2011 and 2015.
* Trained over 600 principals in terms of school administration training
* Trained 30 schools on Child Protection Policy
* Supported 100 schools in terms of financial grants.
* Formed a group comprised of MEDG steering monks to represent and lead for the whole monastic sector.
* Advocated with government to get supporting money for monastic school teachers.
* Advocated with government for a world bank loan with support from the ministry of education.
* Fully tested technology to do E-Learning programs to attract kids (Out of school kids).

In just over four years, MEDG has introduced ambitious changes that have put it on track as a catalyst for monastic education. Against the backdrop of ongoing challenges, it remains steadfast with strong force and hopeful moments. But bigger challenges lie ahead. To meet its contractual commitments with its donors MEDG needs to accelerate momentum.

There are other initiatives MEDG intends to accelerate their projects. These initiatives range from staff capacity development to people planning and budgeting. Moreover, strengthening their advocacy efforts to be recognized under the Ministry of Education remains a big challenge. One encouraging aspect however is that the necessary supporting conditions have started.

As MEDG begins to comprehend the challenges they face, they have prepared to adapt institutional frameworks that offer new forms of partnership as teams recognizes that collaboration is one of the most viable options. Recently MEDG sought the assistance of Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC) for funding, capacity building and training. They have also reinforced their advocacy work to support their initiatives in the next three years. Likewise, more attention has been given to building horizontal relationships to bring stronger links between MEDG and the monks, government, and international funding agencies. These efforts will not be easy but rather both difficult and challenging.

*Original Vision and Theory of Change*

In a least developed country like Myanmar the vision to educate thousands of children through monastic school translates into a legacy of young individuals who commit their time and untapped ambition for the next generation to be educated, and their families and communities to have an improved living standard. MEDG’s theory of change was built to fill one major gap - quality education for all monastic schools through improved quality of teaching and educational support structures, and increased access to learning opportunities by 2020. This vision incorporates appropriate use of technology and mode of access considering the shift in how learning and teaching have changed. By 2020 there will be improved quality of teaching and support structures to inspire children to develop their ability to think, question and progress.

Recently, MEDG has negotiated a grant from the Educate a Child Foundation (EAC) in support of Monastic Schools around Myanmar. The focus of this program is to make education available to over 72,000 children and young people (under the age of 18) around Myanmar, to ensure that these children/youths complete a primary or primary equivalency qualification. These targets are being refined, but at the time of this writing remain. The approach to attain these ambitious targets is broken into five components based on MEDG’s strategic plans.

*Overall policy and leadership*: Monastic Education Supervision Committees are necessary to manage and support schools and to link with the MOE & MORAC. With active committees’, schools will be able to extend to middle and high school without difficulty. Committees can encourage schools to reach desired standards of quality.

*Data collection, analysis, monitoring and evaluation*: MEDG needs to know the current situation in schools to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of schools and enable them to better plan programs to support the improvement of the sector

*School leadership and management system*: There is no commonly agreed upon leadership and management system in place. For sustainability of schools, and to promote trust between school and community, and to maintain school quality, parental and community engagement is required.

*Development of MEDG's organisational capacity to support Monastic education*: As mentioned in earlier sections, MEDG staff’s capacity needs to be enhanced to effectively perform their roles.

*Non-formal education*: One million out of school children lack opportunity and lack of interest in education. Monastic schools are well positioned (geographically, philosophically and historically) to support children and young people who are marginalised.

*Pedagogy, curriculum, language and assessment*: For children to learn happily in a supportive learning environment, with teachers who use relevant curriculum and effective assessment strategies that will prepare them for their future, this must be in place.

*Looking Ahead: 2020 Vision*

There are a few ways government, volunteers, international and local non-government organisations and interested individuals can work with the MEDG to achieve their vision:

First is to help MEDG identify and support young people’s participation in the program. Children drop out or do not go to school for a variety of reasons, many of them directly related to poverty. They are making schools more interesting and motivating for students through improved teaching methods, the integration of technology in some schools and the introduction of flexible school learning hours based on student needs. They need assistance to identify and encourage children and young people to attend their classes. Each school engaged in their program will have its own community mobilisation activities but MEDG has limited resources and would benefit greatly from the support of other actors in the community. Agencies do not need to be working in education but can develop their own creative ideas to introduce out of school children to opportunities in monastic schools and to maintain their attendance once they are enrolled.

Secondly, to provide financial or in-kind support. MEDG’s main challenge is not financial, although more resources will always help. They need to match funds with their main donor (EAC). New partnerships can support children in townships to attend school in a variety of ways, for example, assist with transportation or meals costs; provide children/young people and their families with incentives to maintain their attendance.

Lastly is to advocate with MEDG for marginalised children and their right to education. MEDG is trying to raise awareness about the needs of out of school children and the role that monastic schools can play in addressing this issue. New partnerships can work with them as they meet with government officials, politicians and influential community leaders to raise policy issues and create practical solutions to this significant challenge for the future of Myanmar.

Despite facing many difficulties, MEDG has so far demonstrated their commitment to monastic education, often under very difficult circumstances. Through a combination of internal and external assistance, power and relationships, MEDG finds itself in the unprecedented position of changing the mindset and attitudes not only of its staff, but also the parents and the community, about the value of education, in addition to building collaboration with government and other non-government organisations through advocacy. There is no single voice yet to declare victory of MEDG’s accomplishment but based on my observation there have been general impressive results on at least two points. First, the strategy to enable access to education has been consistent – advocacy, networking, training. Secondly, awareness that they have helped turn the lights on regarding monastic schools. Having said that, their vision remains broader in the coming years.

Critical Thoughts: *The need for a proper mix*

While many of the decade-long conflicts affecting many areas are still ongoing, parallel education systems have been developed by MEDG to provide basic education across Myanmar. The delivery of basic education by MEDG is one such critical social change reaching an underserved and vulnerable population of children and youths. While still in its early stages of educational reform compared to other Buddhist monastic schools in the region, MEDG has been able to establish itself as a catalyst and expand its reach to previously inaccessible areas.

Enormous challenges in achieving their vision require far more than financial support. The culture of the organisation and decisions MEDG make in pursuit of its goals has upended the way the staff think and work. As an organisation MEDG have different ways of working from monastic schools where many of the staff came from. This is a cynical and sad, but a realistic scenario. Much has been said about capacity building but organisational reality tells us that the effectiveness of any organisation depends on the level of competencies of its employees. Different skills will be needed as their momentum intensifies. Perhaps it is high time to have a proper mix of staff from monastic and non-monastic schools.

Besides the challenge of improving the staff mindset and attitude, four things also became clear to me. First, the need to establish organisational processes to effectively support the teacher and school administration training. Secondly, the need to define a model that would enable MEDG to deliver education to thousands of poor and out of school children in a sustainable way. Thirdly, the capacity to continuously influence and educate the monks to improve and standardise the school administration. Lastly, the need for monastic schools to be recognized by the government as a parallel form of education in Myanmar. A parallel system, as well as complementarity with state schools would benefit the entire country in the foreseeable future.

**Final Thoughts**

Decades of a socialist era in Myanmar have not only significantly affected the economic side but also its education system. Myanmar’s education story is quite hard to tell, especially within the interplay of government, religion and the civil society. But one section of the civil society, the Monastic Education Development Group, saw the opportunity to reform education delivered in monastic schools, to address the sad state of Myanmar’s education system. So far, MEDG’s work for over four years has been worthwhile in re-building an education system meant largely for the poor. Monastic Education appears to be the most desirable form of education disadvantaged children can acquire. As this trend continues, the government is allowing a condition that increases literacy in addition to education provided in state schools. Thus, recognition and equivalency for education delivered in monastic schools is essential.

This paper has highlighted the role and challenges of MEDG in improving the standard of education delivered in monastic schools. I have attempted to describe and explain some aspects of monastic schools from my perspective as a VSO volunteer working with MEDG. This paper serves as a starting point for my personal advocacy for MEDG. I hope those who believe that education is the platform on which a nation’s economy is built, and a fundamental prerequisite for disadvantaged children to seize life’s opportunities, will come along with me.

The MEDG story is one that resonates with social catalysts in any field. Increasingly intractable barriers require new and innovative solutions that transcend the boundaries of established cultures and disciplines regarding education and organisation. MEDG is a clear example of a non-profit organisation that represents the voice of monastic education, with aspirations for recognition and systemic change.

*Engaging with MEDG: Contributing to sustainable development*

Stephen Covey said, “give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”. At the end of my placement I realised that my work in MEDG went beyond the job descriptions and agreed key performance indicators. Looking back, perhaps I came at the right time and was placed in the right organisation that was likewise supportive of my work.

Documented policies and processes may well be considered the hard evidence of my impact but eventually these policies will be modified based on the need of the organisation. While hard evidence is important these are only tools to help the staff do the work that needs to be done. A more significant impact for me were the relationships formed, the information shared, the friendships created and the skills acquired by the staff from mentorship and coaching.

I realised my volunteer placement was not entirely about procedure and HR system development. It was about changing the reality of people’s lives in MEDG. I found meaning in my work as volunteer when some staff started to believe in themselves that they can do the job. It was music to my ear when someone told me “thank you for teaching me to write this memo. Now I know how to do the next one”. Or someone who said “I cannot believe I can do this asset register in excel. Now I can monitor and register all old and new furniture, fixture and equipment”. The HR team for example has learned work planning and it has become their weekly activity to support the teacher development team and other simultaneous activities in MEDG. Throughout my placement with MEDG, I found ways to relate to each team that are not based on templates and inflexible procedures. It took some time before I learned to be patient with their attention, to listen to their language and vision and understand the dynamics of how they work. This is particularly important in short-term placements. Eventually they considered my opinions, critical views and advice. They also accepted the interventions introduced. I suppose that is why at the end of placements volunteers are regarded friends, teachers, mentors rather than simply developer of templates and policies.

In volunteering, Individual learning and change is as important to organisational change, as the organisation depends on its individual member. I thought if I listened, looked and learned more about MEDG leadership and staff, I would be able to eventually gain their trust. So, it is not just the idea of transferring skills and knowledge that comes back into the picture but more importantly essence of relationships built between the volunteer and the partner organisation, for volunteering to have a sustainable effect

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1. Phaung Daw Oo Monastic High School is the largest monastic school in Myanmar. It is located in Mandalay, Myanmar. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From the message of *The Venerable U Nayaka, Chair Monastic Education Development Group and Principal of Phaung Daw Oo Monastic High School during the launch of Phaung Daw Oo International University, November 2016.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)