

# “We Want to Work”: Providing Livelihood Opportunities for Refugees in Thailand



Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

September 2006



Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children  
122 East 42nd Street  
New York, NY 10168-1289

tel. 212.551.3111  
fax. 212.551.3180  
wcrwc@womenscommission.org  
www.womenscommission.org

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## Mission Statement

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children works to improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and adolescents. We advocate for their inclusion and participation in programs of humanitarian assistance and protection. We provide technical expertise and policy advice to donors and organizations that work with refugees and the displaced. We make recommendations to policy makers based on rigorous research and information gathered on fact-finding missions. We join with refugee women, children and adolescents to ensure that their voices are heard from the community level to the highest councils of government and international organizations. We do this in the conviction that their empowerment is the surest route to the greater well-being of all forcibly displaced people. Founded in 1989, the Women's Commission is legally part of the International Rescue Committee.

## Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by the trip delegation members: Faye Richardson and Robin Carey, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children Board Members; Elizabeth Learson, Women's Commission supporter; Joan Timoney, Director of Advocacy and External Relations, and Dale Buscher, Director, Protection and Participation Program. The report was edited by Diana Quick, Director of Communications.

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Cover photo: Dale Buscher

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## ACRONYMS

ARC	American Refugee Committee
COERR	Catholic Organization for Emergency Relief and Refugees
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MOI	Ministry of Interior
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
SAW	Social Action for Women
TBBC	Thai Burma Border Consortium
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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## INTRODUCTION

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A delegation from the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, including two staff members, two members from the Commission's Board of Directors and an interested third party, traveled to Thailand from June 22 to July 3, 2006 to assess current livelihood programs targeting refugee women and youth and to learn about emerging opportunities due to lifting of some Thai government restrictions on the ability of refugees to participate in livelihood activities. The delegation held meetings in Bangkok and Mae Sot and traveled to two refugee camps (Mae La and Umpiem) to visit operational livelihood programs and to speak with refugee women and youth about their livelihood needs and aspirations.

Over the course of the delegation, meetings were held with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (ZOA, the Thai Burma Border Consortium [TBBC], WEAVE, Social Action for Women [SAW], the Mae Tao Clinic, American Refugee

Committee [ARC], International Rescue Committee [IRC], Catholic Organization for Emergency Relief and Refugees [COERR], World Education, Jesuit Refugee Services and the Bangkok Refugee Center) as well as with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Bangkok and UNHCR Mae Sot, the U.S. Embassy, the European Union and the Royal Thai Government's Ministry of Interior (MOI).

The purpose of the delegation was to gather data on needs, gaps and promising practices for the Women's Commission's research project entitled, "Promoting Appropriate Livelihoods for Displaced Women and Adolescents." The research project, a comprehensive, global, three-year undertaking, will result in a field manual on designing and implementing effective livelihood interventions for practitioners and will include the funding of pilot programs in five refugee camps in Thailand under the management of IRC and ARC respectively.

## BACKGROUND

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Ethnic minority group members from Burma (also known as Myanmar) began arriving in Thailand in 1984 and have continued to arrive in greater or lesser numbers since. The majority of refugees in the camps are ethnic Karen and Karenni, although large numbers of Shan live in northwestern regions of Thailand outside the nine established camps. Other refugees include Mon and ethnic Burmese, the latter group composed of political activists, students and human rights workers.

At present, there are nine recognized camps along the Thai-Burma border housing some 145,000 refugees. A small number of non-border-country refugees also live in Bangkok (primarily from other Asian countries, Africa and the Middle East). In addition, Thailand hosts some 1.2 million registered and unregistered migrant workers who fill needed labor gaps in the expanding Thai economy. Since the establishment of the camps

and, in fact, going back to the days of the Indochinese refugee presence (Khmer, Lao, Hmong and Vietnamese), the government of Thailand has instituted a policy restricting refugees' freedom of movement with refugees confined to camps with no legal right to work.

As the length of displacement continues to extend for refugees from Burma and with the deteriorating human rights situation inside Burma, the Government of Thailand has recognized the need for a change in policy. In recent months, the Government of Thailand has agreed to allow expansion of the vocational training programs for refugees; the introduction of Thai language classes within the camps for adults as well as in the regular school curriculum for students; and income generation activities within the camps. Additionally, the possibility of refugees working outside the camps is under consideration.

A senior humanitarian worker stated, “The first 15 years of the Burmese refugee camps was a wasted opportunity—so much more could have been accomplished.” Equally telling was a comment from the Deputy Minister of Interior who noted that 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.

## FINDINGS

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The Royal Thai Government has expressed a new openness to vocational training and educational programs for the camp-based Burmese refugee population and is to be commended for taking this positive step towards enhancing the realization of refugee rights. The global anti-warehousing campaign<sup>1</sup> seems to have had a positive impact on Thai government policy. This is an important opening that could make a significant difference for refugees who have traditionally had no opportunities to develop useful skills that would allow them to increase their self-sufficiency and be better positioned for eventual return or resettlement.

The UNHCR and the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) expressed a great sense of urgency that NGOs quickly respond to this new openness and demonstrate leadership and collaboration in developing innovative strategies and plans. There is concern that if this opportunity is not quickly seized, the “window” may again close.

There remains, however, considerable ambiguity about the new, unwritten policy. The Ministry of Education has opened learning centers in each of the camps to hold Thai language classes for adults and the camp-based primary and/or secondary schools will be required to start teaching the Thai language shortly. Expanded vocational training programs are allowed in the camps and Thai officials recognize that these programs have to lead to opportunities for income generation. Products made in the camps will be allowed to be sold outside. Work outside the camps is also under

consideration—although the government has still not spoken clearly on this issue.

At present, work with NGOs as refugee incentive staff, teachers, health workers and the like is the primary means of employment and income generation for the refugees. The Thai government, however, is now asking NGOs to put forward innovative pilot programs that will lead to income generation for the refugees—each proposed pilot would, however, have to be individually reviewed and approved by the MOI. It is not clear how long this process will take and what criteria the proposed programs will be approved against. The MOI is clearly quite concerned that refugees do not compete with neighboring Thai villages’ livelihoods and that all programs also benefit local villagers.

The Thai government does not talk about refugee self-reliance but rather about allowing refugees to supplement their incomes in order to purchase additional food items. This misunderstanding about the overall objective of income generation programs, including reducing long-term dependency on outside food assistance, requires further advocacy work with the government on the part of the international donor and assistance community. The government’s livelihood strategy should not be about refugees’ ability to buy additional food to complement their food rations but about giving refugees the means to achieve food security, thereby eliminating the food rations altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> The anti-warehousing campaign is an initiative of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants that advocates for an end to refugee confinement in camps and for the broader realization of refugee rights—such as the right to work and freedom of movement.



While refugees are now allowed to be transferred to other camps for education and training purposes, the government's concern about further lifting restrictions on refugees' freedom of movement as "they have a responsibility to protect refugees and how can they do that when refugees are outside the camps" needs to be challenged. The Royal Thai Government is responsible for protecting their own citizens who move freely throughout the country—why would this be any different for registered, documented refugees who could legally move around freely?

Nongovernmental organizations appear largely unprepared and/or struggling to seize the opportunities now available with the shift in government policy. This is partially due to a lack of livelihoods capacity but also partially due to misunderstandings and confusion about what the policy really does and does not allow. Without clear guidance from the government about whether refugees can work outside the camps, it is impossible to prepare refugees for local labor markets. And while work inside the camps can provide limited income potential, the camp economy will never replace opportunities that arise with access to expanded markets. Nonetheless, in spite of the lack of clear guidance, it is imperative that the NGOs act both as a means to get clarity (as it is unlikely to come without the MOI being forced to make decisions on specific projects) and as the government is requesting project ideas. As such, the ball is clearly in the court of the operational agencies and if they do not come forward, the opportunity may be missed.

At present, vocational training programs offered in the refugee camps serve small numbers of refugees, are fairly traditional in nature and, in general, do not lead to economic opportunities. Refugees stated that the course offerings were planned without community input. Further, refugees have few, if any, opportunities to use the skills acquired through such training programs. The programs do not match market needs, including those within the camps, and do not appear to build on refugees' existing skills. As such, the livelihood activities are more psychosocial in nature than economic, although it is not clear that this is how the refugees understand the programs. Raising expectations without opportunities to meet those heightened expectations can be both frustrating and detrimental to the psychological

well-being of the participating individuals—ironic perhaps for programs that are partially about promoting psychosocial recovery.

A couple of training projects visited or discussed, however, demonstrated innovation matched with need, for example, offering nurses aide training for refugees being resettled to the United States and elsewhere where there are huge demands for such in nursing homes. Likewise, the ZOA project to train refugees in solar panel installation and repair to service the solar panels distributed to local villagers throughout Tak Province shows promise and could address a real market need.

A couple of "relief substitution" projects are also underway through which refugees are paid to produce items otherwise purchased by the humanitarian community for distribution. For example, WEAVE/Karen Women's Organization weaves and distributes sarongs for pregnant refugee women on an as-needed basis, and also for the general population (all Burmese men and women in the camps receive a new sarong once every two years). Vertical gardens are also being promoted in some camps to complement food rations.

Home-based income generation activities, primarily weaving, are in place for women and provide safe employment. However, the impact of these programs—in terms of income generated—needs to be assessed, and further home-based income generation activities explored.

After being confined to the camps for an extended period of time, refugees lack exposure to the outside world and may advocate for more of what they know and see rather than for training activities that match market needs. Refugee women did, however, suggest a variety of income generation activities that they would like to pursue—such as growing mushrooms, setting up a bottled water production facility and making laundry soap.

The lack of Thai language skills among the majority of the refugee population puts them at considerable disadvantage if they are allowed to access employment opportunities outside the camps. This is less of a concern, however, for Karen refugees living near Thai Karen communities.

The lack of income generation and employment opportunities is having an impact on young refugees within the camps. With no potential after secondary school, the youth are reportedly



increasingly turning to alcohol, drugs and violence. Humanitarian workers note that the camps are very different today than they were five years ago, with growing frustrations and problems. Older refugees talk about skill loss, that is, the erosion of previous skills when there is no opportunity to put them to use.

Many refugees work illegally outside the camps—upwards of perhaps 40 percent. Local work is available to refugees in the agricultural, construction, fisheries, garment, and unskilled industry sectors—jobs referred to as the three D’s (disgusting, dirty and dangerous) and largely undesired by the Thai locals. Both humanitarian workers and government officials recognize this reality but the government has not, as yet, addressed ways to regularize refugees’ out-of-camp work. The lack of regularization and legalization of such work leaves refugees open to exploitation by their employers (they are paid, on average, 50 percent less than the daily minimum wage), as well as arrest, detention and deportation by immigration and law enforcement officials for breaking the encampment policy restriction. The camps, however, are porous. Refugees are working outside and if they could do it legally, their vulnerability would be decreased.

Refugees from one of the northern camps did go out each day under an agreement with local authorities to do flood repair in local villages. This example could perhaps be replicated to use refugee labor for infrastructure development projects.

The locations of the various camps, however,

greatly impact outside opportunities. The Mae La camp near Mae Sot offers the most potential for accessing the local labor market. Mae La is strategically placed along a major highway and only one hour from the estimated 100 garment factories located in the expanding frontier town of Mae Sot. Other camps are far less accessible to urban centers, although some remote camps could provide laborers for agricultural activities in their respective regions.

There does, however, appear to be a lack of awareness on the part of the government that expanding livelihood opportunities for refugees could have a positive effect on local economies and, subsequently, on the economic well-being of local residents. Carefully planned livelihood interventions could, in fact, expand economic opportunities for all—filling local labor needs, allowing for local industry expansion, increasing the circulation of money to local businesses and expanding the consumer base.

A note of caution is in order, however, as much of the work outside the camps is often exploitative—in terms of financial compensation, working conditions and employee benefits. While factory and agricultural work are perhaps the best options available to refugees who risk working outside the camps, these employers need to raise their standards with regards to labor practices and ensure compliance with Thai labor law or at least equal to the conditions of local Thai laborers in the region (who often do not receive minimum wage in economically less developed areas of the country).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Donors and policy makers should urge the Thai government to take concrete steps to implement the new policy on training and economic opportunities for refugees and continue to advocate for an expansion of this policy to include allowing the refugees to work outside the camps.
- The Government of Thailand should align its refugee policy with its policy on migrant workers and provide refugees the same rights and opportunities as registered migrant workers. If Thailand can absorb some 1.2 million migrant workers into its labor market and employers express a need for an additional 500,000 laborers, it can absorb the 40,000 or so camp-based refugees of working age.
- UNHCR and the NGO community should develop and present a strategic plan for livelihoods to the Thai authorities as part of an overall strategy for dealing with the refugee population. The strategy should address how refugee livelihood programs can include and benefit local host communities.
- The strategic plan should emphasize that the displaced population be seen as an opportunity with possibilities to contribute rather than as a drain on the economy and resources. UNHCR's examples from other locations such as Tanzania and Zambia where both communities benefited should be shared with the Government of Thailand to demonstrate that mutual benefit is possible.
- A starting point for new livelihoods programming should be documentation of what refugees are already doing inside and outside the camps and exploration of how those activities can be expanded and capitalized on. The employment and income generation opportunities refugees are currently pursuing outside the camps could be a starting point for future livelihood interventions. Labor resources in the camps, once identified, should be promoted as a potential benefit for outside employers.
- UNHCR, relevant NGOs, the Ministry of Interior and the National Security Council should convene a working group on refugee livelihoods and Thai policy implementation that meets regularly to discuss obstacles and lessons, and proposes innovative pilot programs. The working group could use the model of the Education Forum that meets every two months at Chulalongkorn University and includes Ministry of Education, Ministry of Interior, Foreign Affairs, National Security Council, World Education, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and ZOA.
- Nongovernmental organizations working in the camps should quickly capitalize on the announced shift in Thai policy and develop creative livelihood programs that match market needs (in or out of camp) and provide refugees with the skills training needed to meet those needs. The NGOs should focus on playing a facilitative role—bringing together supply and demand.
- NGOs should undertake comprehensive skills inventories of the refugee population in each of the camps to document available skill sets that could be matched with opportunities as well as built upon with targeted training to upgrade existing skills.
- The humanitarian assistance community should propose innovative projects to the Thai authorities including those that experiment with daily and weekly camp passes for refugees in order to provide them with opportunities to legally work in local factories and farms outside the camps. This could start as a pilot project, with small numbers of refugees given day passes and expanded as its success is assessed.
- Local businesses should be identified for apprenticeship placements wherein businessmen could be paid for mentoring/tutoring refugee apprentices in relevant skill areas.
- Local factory owners should be invited to the camps to generate interest in having some of their products produced inside the camps and to assess outsourcing potential. Recruitment from the camps to local factories and farms

should also be encouraged, but under working conditions that meet local labor standards.

- Vocational training programs should employ Thai nationals brought in to teach specific needed skills as a means to improve the quality of said programs and to serve as a bridge between the refugee and host communities.
- Vocational training programs that do not lead to economic opportunities and/or that teach skills the refugees already know should be discontinued. Only those training programs that provide potential for income generation should be promoted. The programs should include training for work in the factories and in the agricultural sector as these are their “best options” for employment. All vocational training programs offered should build on existing skills and upgrade those and match them with market needs.
- Vocational training programs need to be certified, perhaps in partnership with local labor unions or Thai vocational training centers, and refugees need to be provided certificates which detail classes completed and skills learned.
- Refugees should be trained with a designated placement or opportunity in mind. Vocational training programs should have a placement office attached or built into the program to match graduates with jobs and/or additional opportunities—such as access to credit programs.
- Refugee access to educational and skills development opportunities outside the camps should be promoted. For example, refugee access to Thai vocational training centers should be assessed as an additional skills development option. Additionally, refugee inter-camp travel, such as that for World Education’s Intensive English Program, to allow access to training and mentoring opportunities in the other camps, should be continued and expanded.
- Further study programs, post Standard 10,

including possible distance learning programs, should be pursued to assist idle and out-of-school youth.

- More possibilities for “relief substitution” programs should be explored through an assessment of all materials (food and non-food) provided by the international community with the objective of having refugees produce as many of these items for themselves as possible.
- Trainings—such as those piloted by ZOA related to environmentally friendly energy sources and uses, both solar and hydro power, that would provide useful skills to refugees as well as benefit local Thai villages—should be field-tested and expanded. Other environmental activities should be explored such as reforestation and forest management as a means of addressing government concerns about environmental damage and as a means for contribution from the refugee community to the host community.
- The International Labor Organization (ILO) or other labor expert should be engaged to undertake an assessment of factory working conditions in the Mae Sot area and work with factory owners to promote safe, fair labor practices.
- Resettlement countries and UNHCR should use resettlement strategically as leverage with the Government of Thailand to promote local integration as a durable solution of at least equal numbers of refugees—on the condition that this is the durable solution of choice for some of the refugees.
- The humanitarian community should urge continued attention to the plight of Burmese refugees. Their story may have fallen off the front pages, but their needs are no less compelling. In fact, their plight has become even more desperate as hopes for repatriation recede and years of restricted movement and no right to work have taken their toll on old and young alike.

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New York, NY 10168-1289

tel. 212.551.3088  
fax. 212.551.3180  
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