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Thuta Aung, left, director of business development consultancy firm HamsaHub and Founder of social enterprise Hatchlon, discusses social benefits with group members

Workshop Helps Social Entrepreneurs

A Look at Social Enterprise in Myanmar and the Region

BY HAN MYO Oo, HANOI



Doing good and doing business don't always fit. In Myanmar, there are many NGOs and charities that strive to bring about social good and alleviate poverty, but they lack a proper business model to sustain their work. On the other hand, traditional businesses that are solely based on financial profits may have the financial means to provide sizeable donations to charities, but may fail to address issues such as fair employment opportunities, empowerment, education and capacity building for Myanmar's labour force through their process.

"Social entrepreneurship" aims to put the do-gooders on a more sustainable business footing. And ideas for this are now being revealed to NGOs and charities in Myanmar.

MYANMAR NGO REPS IN HANOI

"Social enterprise. I prefer to think of it as a verb – to be socially enterprising," said Jeremy Nicholls, the chief executive of the Social Return on Investment (SROI) Network, an international membership organization for individuals, organizations and companies supporting principles and standards in accounting for social value. Nicholls was speaking at a training session on how to measure and evaluate the impact of social enterprises at a "Skills for Social Entrepreneurs" workshop in Hanoi, Vietnam from June 18-20.

The three-day workshop was the third and last event of the British Council's project to build capacity and create a social entrepreneur network between Asia and Europe. The event is the sequel to a workshop that took place May 21-23 in Yangon.

Both the Yangon and the Hanoi workshops were collaborations between the British Council and the Asia-Europe foundation (ASEF), and were funded by the government of Japan

and the British Embassy in Myanmar.

The British Council has been providing mentoring programmes for Asian entrepreneurs since 2009, but Smita Dasgupta, the project executive from ASEF, told M-ZINE+ that they became interested in the initiative after a colleague participated in a workshop run by the British Council in Bangkok earlier this year.

“I think that the whole concept of social entrepreneurship is very cross-cutting,” she said. “And this is exactly what we’re trying to do at ASEF. We’re trying to marry the themes that we work on to do more interdepartmental, inter-thematic projects.”

The Director for Public Affairs at ASEF, Paul Koh, added: “ASEF brings the peoples of Asia and Europe closer together. We show them the value of connecting with each other over continents.”

AN INTERNATIONAL MIX

About 50 participants representing social enterprises in Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam, Korea, Denmark, France, Slovakia, UK, Lithuania and Hungary, as well as ASEF and the British Council took part in interactive breakout sessions and group presenta-

tions to evaluate social enterprises, and engaged in field studies to select local social enterprises.

Participants at the Hanoi workshop visited Tohe, a social enterprise that makes and sells fabric accessories printed with drawings done by disadvantaged children, Sao Mai Center, which provides early protection services, care and parental counseling for mentally challenged children, and Linktam, a social enterprise that provides psychological counseling over phone.

They also visited a global leader in the social enterprise sector, KOTO, a hospitality-training provider that has trained over 300 Vietnamese street children.

Part of the debate during the workshop revolved around the question of whether a certain organization met the criteria to be deemed a social enterprise, a question that not only goes hand-in-hand with the ethos of measuring social impact but also highlights the importance of accountability in social business.

Nicholls considers social entrepreneurship a “way of thinking” in which an enterprise – through trading and selling goods and services – is able to run activities that create social value. “If we can prove that difference has been made and that value has been created, then fantastic.”



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Top: Participants discuss impact evaluation.
 Bottom: Kyi Kyi Win Oo, far left, Founder and Director of BusinessKind and GoodSleep.



Participants of the “Skills for Social Entrepreneurs” workshop in Hanoi, June 18-20

MYANMAR INPUT

Thuta Aung, a participant from Myanmar, stressed the importance of putting NGO ventures on a business footing. “A social enterprise must be a business, but throughout the process – and not just the end – of serving your customers, you have already fulfilled the social needs that ordinary businesses or the government sector cannot fulfill,” he said.

In addition to being director of HamsaHub, a Myanmar business development consultancy firm, Thuta Aung is the founder of Hatchlon, a social enterprise led by an executive committee of students that assists in new venture creation, business incubation and organizational development, while addressing social enterprise start-up needs in Myanmar.

Additionally, he contributes his time to teaching at the Myanmar Human Resources (MHR) Business and Management Institute in downtown Yangon and the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UM-FCCI) training institute. He told M-ZINE+ that with his new network of foreign social enterprises, he plans to send his students to do internships abroad, which will provide them with a stronger understanding of the organization and sector.

“There are many charities and NGOs who are pretending to be social enterprises. There are some businesses who might donate a few million kyat to charitable ends and think they are social enterprises,” he said, highlighting the fact that, in

Myanmar, organizations have yet to fully marry the charity and the business aspects, despite promoting themselves as social enterprises.

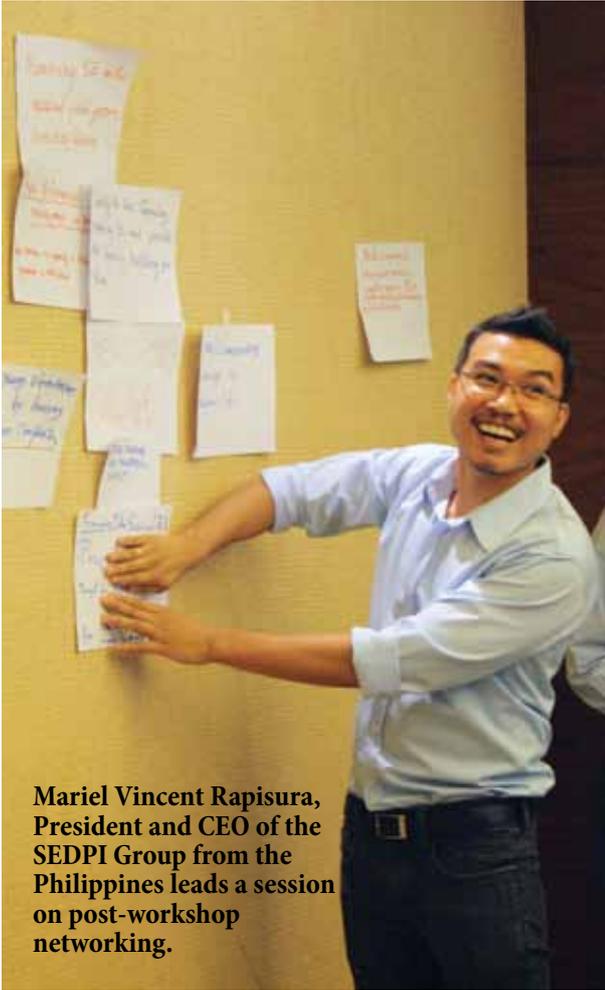
RETHINKING THE NGO APPROACH

NGOs and charities in Myanmar strive to bring about social good and alleviate poverty but struggle with being able to sustain their work and may not have a solid business and management base.

Although the goals of a social enterprise are not unlike those of a traditional NGO, social entrepreneurial work can also be seen as a critique of the latter. When Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar’s delta region in 2008, many local and international organizations provided aid and relief to survivors. But according to another workshop participant, Kyi Kyi Win Oo, founder and director of BusinessKind and GoodSleep, even a year after Nargis, the victims didn’t know how to support themselves.

She told M-ZINE+: “They forgot to stand on their own feet, so we got the idea to teach them how to catch fish, and not continuously give them fish.”

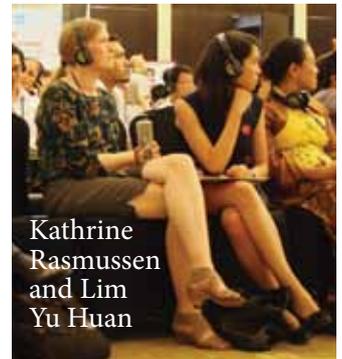
BusinessKind and GoodSleep demonstrate Kyi Kyi’s metaphor of teaching the victims “how to catch fish” as BusinessKind develops businesses that provide affordable products and services while creating employment opportunities that help communities emerge from poverty. Good-



Mariel Vincent Rapisura, President and CEO of the SEDPI Group from the Philippines leads a session on post-workshop networking.



Apirak Kosayodhin, left, and Jimmy Pham, right, were keynote speakers at the first Asia-Europe Social Enterprise Day.



Kathrine Rasmussen and Lim Yu Huan



Participants were served lunch at the KOTO office. KOTO is a hospitality-training provider that has trained over 300 Vietnamese street children.

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Vietnamese Social Enterprise, Tohe, makes and sells fabric accessories printed with drawings done by disadvantaged children.

Sleep is one such social business that makes and sells quality mosquito bed nets, and employs non-skilled workers who are stigmatized in other work environments, such as women with HIV. Good-Sleep also provides sewing training to its employees, and the small profit from sales is used to enhance employee benefits and reduce the price of their bed nets.

“Our country is a really endemic area of malaria and dengue fever, so people really need bed nets. We make simple products and give jobs to poor women,” she added.

Although her work manifests a reputable model of social enterprise, Ma Kyi Kyi said that she got new ideas from the workshop, noting: “Business is really important. Do business first. Do business successfully, but with a social mind.”

Kathrine O. Rasmussen, a European participant at the workshop, agrees. Rasmussen, who also participated in the Yangon workshop, is the founding partner and CEO of ActionTank, a design consultancy company that helps organiza-

tions create social and environmental change through new products, services and strategies in Denmark.

She told M-ZINE+: “Myanmar social enterprises are lacking the business. They’re very NGO-focused and very dependent on funding from big companies or charity organizations. To be dependent on funding is very insecure because at one point there is no more money, and within one year, everything you have worked on for the last 15 years can just disappear. And you can’t grow – often, you get the same amount of money [each year], so it’s very difficult to actually expand.”

Rasmussen said she also obtained some good learning points as a result of different approaches to social entrepreneurship in Europe and in Asia. She noted that Myanmar’s context is unique, and that although the Hanoi workshop emphasized the importance of making a model replicable, it is difficult in a country like Myanmar where social and environmental issues are very locally based.

She added: “We had two full days of just site

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Organizations have yet to fully marry the charity and the business aspects, despite promoting themselves as social enterprises.

visits. It was very interesting to see where Myanmar is at this time and what is actually going on.”

MYANMAR SOCIAL VALUES

Zaw Naing, committee head of the Business Resource Center for the Myanmar Business Executives (MBE) Association said that although the concept of social enterprise is new in Myanmar, community spirit and social values already exist and are inherent in Myanmar culture. Primarily Buddhist, Myanmar people believe in *mitta*, or benevolence, and often donate money to erect stupas, build schools in rural areas, or help the aged. “These are good foundational roots,” he said.

MBE is an alumni association of MBA graduates that runs a business capacity building centre where mentors such as Zaw Naing himself teach classes on things they learned in their MBA programme to people who are unable to receive such a formal education.

“Myanmar is opening up, so we need a lot of business people,” he said. “Our programme wasn’t started as a social enterprise, but it can be considered as one.”

Thuta Aung said Myanmar can see a lot more social entrepreneurs. “But what Myanmar should not take as a view is that we [Myanmar people] are totally naïve about social enterprise, no!” Like Zaw Naing, he believes that social work is inherent in Myanmar culture.

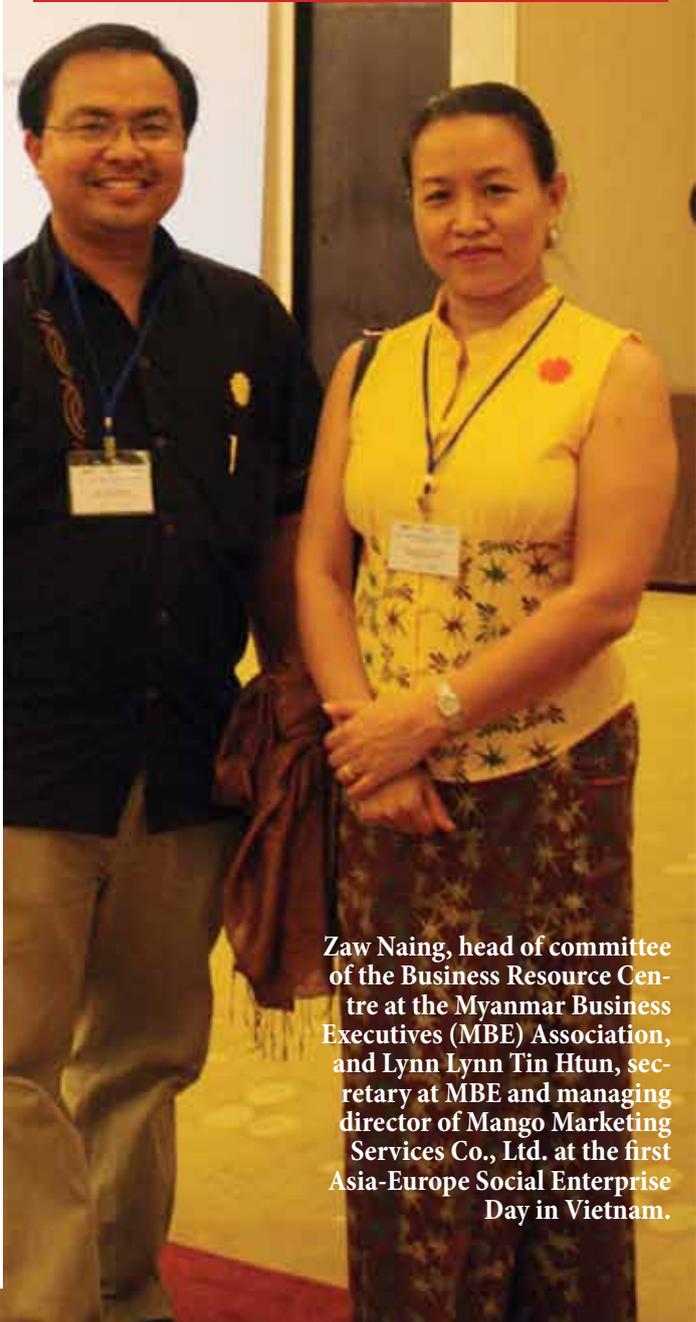
“We have to make our own concept of social enterprise – the [Myanmar] version,” he said.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN INPUT

The workshop also received positive feedback from the other Southeast Asian participants. Lim Yu Huan, business development manager at Social Innovation Park (SIP) in Singapore, said that she particularly enjoyed the visits to the local Vietnamese social enterprises because it sparked her interest to understand what is happening on the ground in Vietnam.

“This is a really amazing event because it’s

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Zaw Naing, head of committee of the Business Resource Centre at the Myanmar Business Executives (MBE) Association, and Lynn Lynn Tin Htun, secretary at MBE and managing director of Mango Marketing Services Co., Ltd. at the first Asia-Europe Social Enterprise Day in Vietnam.

really forming relationships between the Asian entrepreneurs as well as the European entrepreneurs when you normally wouldn't have the chance to interact with each other," she said.

Koh said that with the approval from ASEF's Board of Governors, he hopes that ASEF can work on more projects that are related to social entrepreneurship.

"The idea of bringing Europeans and Asians together is a very broad concept, but it is an umbrella that is useful for us when we want to use it to create events that are of use to our people. This is wonderful because this is a time when Myanmar is opening up, the Vietnamese are even more interested in business than before, so this is one way that people can actually get together to make money just by pooling together what they have," he said.

BRITISH COUNCIL MYANMAR'S ROLE

Dasgupta added that the reason for having a strong Myanmar component in the initiative and many Myanmar participants is that British Coun-

cil Myanmar is taking the lead in this project. "I think this partnership will continue and I hope they will be participating in future workshops as well."

The intimate workshop was followed by the first ever Asia-Europe Social Enterprise Day in Vietnam, where the workshop participants and local social enterprises showcased their work to over 200 attendants. Apirak Kosayodhin, a Thai MP and chairman of Asian Knowledge Institute (AKI), and Jimmy Pham, CEO and founder of KOTO were keynote speakers for the plenary discussion on social innovation.

Ma Kyi Kyi said that the plenary discussion made her think about the important role of advocacy and government policies for social enterprises, and how they can approach the local government to promote and protect social enterprises back home in her country, Myanmar.

"We can't do it alone, so we will work together with different stakeholders to fight poverty in our country," she said.

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Myanmar social enterprises are lacking the business. They're very NGO-focused and very dependent on funding.



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