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Small business can make big impact

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SOCIAL entrepreneurs from Asia and Europe descended on Yangon last week to meet leaders of businesses and non-government organisations operating in the education, public health and environment sectors.

About 30 representatives from the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Myanmar Business Executives group and the British Council attended the May 21-23 workshop, which was held for the first time in Myanmar.

ASEF's director of intellectual exchange Sol Iglesias said social entrepreneurs aim to improve the social and living conditions of people and communities.

"Just as business entrepreneurs create and transform whole industries, social entrepreneurs and enterprises act as the change agents for society," Ms Iglesias said.

"When states are weak in terms of being able to provide basic services to their populace, that's where community service-oriented NGOs have filled the gap."

Ms Iglesias said ASEF, which was developed to promote understanding and relationships between Asia and Europe, was very excited to be able to hold its first social entrepreneur workshop with the British Council in Myanmar.

"There's a growing business community here that has really prioritised societal needs over profit."

One businessman helping his community is U Myat Thu Win, the director of Shwe Minn Tha Enterprises, a group of media, real estate and printing companies.

U Myat Thu Win, who was born with cerebral palsy, started a foundation in 2008 and uses money from his businesses to support people with disabilities by creating education, training and employment opportunities.

He said physically disabled people often faced social exclusion.

"People's attitudes towards physically disabled people have changed a lot but it is still the most difficult barrier for us to cross," he said.

"In the past, parents used to hide physically disabled children at home, but now it is very rare as the community's attitude has changed."

The British Council's director for Burma Alan Smart said social enterprises were important for the country's future development.

"As chance gather pace in Myanmar the British Council believes social enterprise has a crucial role to play in empowering organisations that are working to meet social and environmental needs (amongst others) to make a positive impact in their communities," Mr Smart said.

One of the workshop participants, Danish social entrepreneur Kathrine Rasmussen, said she hoped to work in Myanmar helping farmers develop an organic agricultural industry.

Ms Rasmussen said encouraging people to start small businesses was a great way for them to financially support themselves, their families and their communities.

"In Europe right now there's a really big conversation around social entrepreneurship, whether it should come from businesses or from non-governmental organisations," she said.

"There's this tendency you need to get rid of the NGOs and bring in businesses so people can sustain themselves financially.

"I think that's a really good initiative which will make financially sustainable businesses."

The three-day workshop was funded by the British embassy in Myanmar and the Japanese government.



A girl learns how to weave in a textile factory.
Pic: Supplied/Asia-Europe Foundation

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