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Greater Access to Education for Children of Foreign Migrants

Foreign migrants from neighbouring countries of Thailand, such as Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, Burmese migrant workers are the biggest group. Their migration is primarily resulted from internal political problem. These Burmese migrants came to Thailand because Myanmar shares a long border line with Thailand. They came with their families. As a result, large number of children were born and grown in Thailand. Some of these children have got education in school system per their rights as recognized by the Convention on Rights of the Child and legally acknowledged by regulation of Ministry of Education of 2005 and decision of the Cabinet on July 8, 2005 providing that all educational institutions are obliged by law to enroll undocumented or non-Thai children.

Nevertheless, there are numerous children of foreign migrants who do not enjoy this right due to several reasons. For example, families of these children are poor or are not aware of their right. Schools do not know this regulation of Ministry of Education, or do not have sufficient financial resources. Furthermore, some teachers or parents of Thai children have negative attitude and do not want their children to study in the same classes with children of foreign migrants. Besides, there is

also a concern on national security on the part of Thai government.

The above situation affected many children who do not have access to education. They have to enter the world of work at underage. They have to take up inappropriate jobs. Some are not taken care of when their parents have to go out to work. This situation leads to many other social problems, such as street children, drugs, crimes, and children falling victims of human trafficking, which further lead to ever more complex and serious social problems.

Education of children of foreign migrants will help them to gain knowledge and skill in making a living, and enable them to improve their quality of life and their families to live with fuller human dignity, and also enable them to live together in Thai society harmoniously and peacefully.

Being aware of the significance of the above mentioned problems, Justice and Peace (formerly Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace - CCJP) and Migration Departments (formerly National Catholic Commission on Migration - NCCM) of Caritas Thailand, and National Catholic Education Council co-organised a seminar on “Greater Access to

Education for Children of Foreign Migrants” on March 2, 2011 at De Montfort Conference Hall, St.Gabriel Foundation Building, Thonglor 25, Sukhumvit 55. This seminar was attended by over 40 people who are women and men religious, personnel of Catholic organisations, representatives of National Catholic Education Council and personnel of concerned state agencies, such as National Human Rights Commission, representatives of Human Rights Study and Social Development Center of Mahidol University, etc.



Ms. Patipat Paitrakulpong

The seminar started with presentation of case studies, which **Ms. Patipat Paitrakulpong**, a staff member responsible for human rights desk of CCJP has visited 4 field areas to gather information at Mae Sot District of Tak province, Muang District of Samutsakhon Province, Muang District of Ranong Province and Muang District of Phuket Province, and a special field of study at La Salle Learning Center in Sangkhlaburi District, Kanchanaburi Province, with the following results.

The field areas for this study provide different models of education for children of foreign migrants according to their local context. In Mae Sot District of Tak Province, there models of education provided by both

public schools and learning centers organized by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The number of children receiving educations is the highest because of the presence of numerous children in the area and most of their parents are factory and farm workers with low rate of migration. In Samutsakhon Province, systematic education is provided by public schools with a few learning centers provided by NGOs. However, local Buddhist temples also provide education for children living around the temples. In Ranong Province, NGOs are pioneers in providing education to this group of children continuously until they could advocate for integration of Burmese children with public school system, which gains ever more acceptance at present. Phuket Province is the area where fewer children of foreign migrants have access to education. There is no concrete education provision by either public schools or NGOs primarily due to high rate of labour migration and cost of living.

Problems and obstacles faced in the course of provision of education for children of foreign migrants by both public schools and learning centers are similar, especially financial resources, personnel, teaching aids, building and lunch, communication with children and prejudice of parents of Thai children and Thai communities, as well as concern on national security. For learning centers, they face added problems of standard of curriculum, continuity in teaching, issuance of certificate of completion of education, legality in establishment of learning center and support from the government.

Potential guidelines for support on access to education of children of foreign migrants are: 1) provision of financial support, scholarship, lunch, stationery and teaching aid

and personnel for learning centers and public schools that do not have sufficient resources; 2) provision of assistance to learning center or public schools in the form of twinning program for mutual aid in all aspects; 3) provision of support for establishment of private schools; 4) provision of access to education of more children of foreign migrants to get enrolled in public schools; and 5) dissemination of information to promote mutual understanding on rights of children to education in broader society.



After the case presentation, there was a panel discussion on sharing of experience in providing education to children of foreign migrants by 4 resource persons.

1. **Ms. Suree Vinitchob**, former director of Santawa Mitree Suksa School, which is a private school developed from learning center in Mae Sot district, Tak Province.
2. **Ms. Saowanee Sawang-arom**, director of Wat Siri Mongkhon School, which is a public school providing education to a big number of children of foreign migrants in Samutsakhon Province.
3. **Ms. Weerawan Wisetsing**, a co-founding teacher of a learning center supported by La Salle Brothers, in Kanchanaburi Province.
4. **Ms. Jaruwat Panwisai**, representative of the office of basic educational policy and plan of Ministry of Education.

Ms. Suree Vinitchob, former director of Santawa Mitree Suksa School, shared her experience as a private sector in providing education to children of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot District, such as Santawa Mitree Suksa School, Holy Infant Orphanage, St. Peter learning center, New Blood learning center, and sending Burmese children to Ban Tha Art public school, as well as providing special evening tuition for children. What she has achieved is advocating for learning center as a private welfare school, which has been set up in 2009.

“The strength of learning center is small or no expenditure because parents of some children are employed only 5 days a month and earn 80-90 Baht a day. The center could not ask parents to give contribution to education of their children. Second, there is great diversity of languages. We teach Burmese, Karen and English languages, and Mathematics. The learning center does not have strict regulations. For example, children do not have to come to class at least 80% of school time. They do not have to wear uniform or there is any regulation on stationery, etc.

When the children have educational certificate, they could continue in higher education or apply for job. For example, if

they apply for job in factory, they would get higher position than Burmese children who could not communicate in Thai. In 2007, we sent 170 children to get enrolled in Tha Art School. More than 30 children were dropouts because they could not adjust themselves to Thai school system, or they could not come to school because of their poverty as they have to help their parents earn income, such as sewing, construction work, etc. In the evening, we teach adults, such as factory workers. If they could communicate in Thai, they would be able to help themselves. Various training courses are provided, such as household accounting. We also make visitation to homes of the children. Some homes use fertilizer sacks to make walls of their houses. For water buckets, they put a plastic bag into fertiliser sack because they often move their houses. One house normally accommodates 7-8 people. Our work is carried out with several hearts and brains.”



Ms. Weerawan Wisetsing, a co-founding teacher of La Salle learning center in Kanchanaburi Province shared information that Sangkhlaburi District has many poor people. They speak different languages, such as Burmese, Mon, Plaung and Karen. She described background of ‘Bamboo School’, or

La Salle learning center that it has been set up in November 2007. She and her friends went to an area near the Thai-Burmese border at Three Pagodas Pass, which is called six thousand rais. It is a rubber plantation with Burmese, Karen and Mon working as wage earners. They saw children playing in the factory without having a chance to study because of their poverty. So, they persuaded these children to study with them. At the beginning, they taught the children under rubber trees and used their own money in the management.

“The children were happy that teachers came to teach them. We used motorbikes to visit the place. The children ran to use and said ‘Sia Malabi’ (teacher is here), which was encouragement for us to carry on. Though we thought to stop teaching because of lack of money, but we actually could not when we saw the children and we looked at each other and asked ourselves could we stop this? We went to talk with factory owner who agreed to give 400 Baht per day for lunch of the children. We wrote letters everyday to raise fund from various sources until National Catholic Commission for Migration (NCCM) came with Bro. Victor Gil Munos to visit us. We were very happy that someone was interested to give assistance to the children and teachers.”

“At present, there are 233 children, 114 girls and 119 boys, studying at the center. They are Burmese, Mon, Karen, Laos and Thais. We primarily teach Thai language with a teacher teaching Burmese language. We have 13 teachers. The learning center is divided into 8 classrooms. Two of them are for kindergarten children, 3 classrooms for grade 1 of elementary education, and a class each for students in grade 2-4 of elementary education. Children over 15 years old are sent

to study at non-formal education center. Our curriculum is developed from a national curriculum with priority on teaching the children to speak, read and write Thai language and can use in their daily life.”

“Education should not be limited just to a square room or beautiful building. It is more important that we should be committed with our hearts and look ahead, bringing love of God into our hearts, asking His blessing for our daily work. Provision of education is not a duty of any single person or agency, but of all. In a very remote area far from modernity, there are still many children who do not have access to education. Although we have donors and benefactors, but assistance is still not enough. May I invite all of you to sow the seed of good, love and beauty in providing education for children who are less-advantaged in education.”



Ms. Saowanee Sawang-arom, director of Wat Siri Mongkhon School in Samutsakhon Province told the story of living condition of foreign migrants that they were living in great hardship. *“Some children of these workers have to work as well. If they do not have job, they would not have money to buy food. These children have low social asset. We enrolled*

these children in school because on the way to my school I saw these children running around playing. So, I stopped my car and asked them, but they did not speak to me. So, I thought they were Burmese children for sure. Then, I gradually persuaded them to study before the government announced its policy to enroll these children in public school. When regional basic education office came to monitor the school, we had to hide these children in mangrove. We started with a small number of children of foreign migrants. Now, we have over 800 children of foreign migrants.”

“I told my teachers that we should live together with love. We have to love these children first and take care of them. As such, we are making more merits than building a temple. We love them, and they will love us in return, and happiness will come. We wrote a banner at the school as ‘school of happiness, anyone coming in will be happy. I asked my school personnel how we could ignore these children, leaving them running around and were manipulated, and becoming social problem. We should give them education without expecting anything in return beside happiness. We will be happy when we see the faces of these children. I talked to all teachers recruited and assigned to this school that our context was like this. If they expected something in return, such as special tuition fee, the school did not have because it only gives.”

“Children are human being. If they could choose where to be born, they would have chosen to be born in the wombs of Thai women. Who would take care of them, if we refuse to do so? I always asked these children if they grew up would they return to Myanmar. No one raised their hands. If they continue to live in Thailand, what would be

their living conditions because Thai laws prohibit them from engaging in several jobs? Are they only destined to be factory workers? We have to break some rules for the children. We need to develop specific curriculum for this group of children. They are in Thailand, so they must know Thai language for communication. So, we provide serious curriculum on Thai language. We need to teach them life skill, a living in society, supporting them to live in Thailand happily without posing problems to Thai people. They should be able to take up jobs. Do we take care of them better than Thai children? I can say no. We want community members and parents to learn their language and cultures instead of rejecting them. We need to publicise that this group of children has the same rights and human dignity as ours.”



Fr. Suwat Luangsa-ard

At the end of this session, there was sharing of opinion. **Fr. Suwat Luangsa-ard**, director of Suratthani Diocesan Social Center (DISAC) shared information that “DISAC, especially in

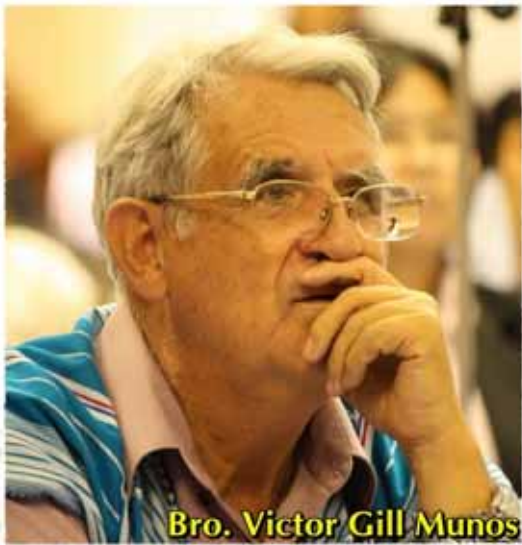
Phangnga Province, started to integrate learning center with local school, encouraging these schools to accept learning center with Burmese children. At present, DISAC is operating 5 learning centers. NGOs in other areas also do the same. I agree that we should advocate for clear and actual implementation of policies of Ministry of Education. There is a question why this learning center could be done without much problem at Mae Sot District, but in several other areas it is very difficult.”



Mr. Virote Nittayo


Mr. Virote Nittayo from Suratthani DISAC shared his opinion that “*this is a universal problem. The same problem exists in America and Europe. It is the emotion of human beings who are fond of their homeland and are suspicious of alien people, looking down those who are poorer, manipulate the weak. We need to know our and their natures, people with whom we are in contacted with. The work on human attitude takes time. People who are doing this work need to persevere difficulties and resistance. We have to address this problem for justice. There are many Thai people who are related to Burmese workers, such as people who sell ‘Som Tum’ (papaya salad), ice cream, or water in Phuket. When all Burmese in the camp were arrested, they were stunned and lost their income. So,*

they do not have money to support their families.”



Bro. Victor Gill Munos, supervisor of La Salle learning center in Sangkhlaburi, shared that *“I would like to encourage all of us who are involved in this work. I am very happy that the Cabinet has made decision in 2005 to extend education for people who do not have registration or Thai nationality. Most people involved in the work on education do not know*

about this decision, or they know but pretend to be ignorant, such as public, private and Catholic schools. If we enroll Burmese children we are not breaking the laws. Many Catholic schools are afraid of enrolling Burmese children who do not have proper documents because they do not know how to deal with officials from Ministry of Education during their monitoring visit. We should all help publicise these policies.

*In 1960, UNESCO has come up with Convention Against Discrimination in Education. It is an important instrument to address problem of foreign children. It states that all children living in a particular country would get education like children holding nationality of that country without any discrimination. We have provided education for foreign children before the laws were introduced. We have to move forward. **Life should come first, justice and compassion should come first, regulations follow.** *

The case study and seminar on **“Greater Access to Education for Children of Foreign Migrants”** aimed at promoting mutual understanding and raising awareness of administrators of Catholic schools on providing greater access to education for children of foreign workers with policies to accept children of foreign workers to be enrolled in their schools, and to raise awareness of the Church on right of children of foreign children to education, which would then lead to a search for common solution.