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# ROOM TO GROW FOUNDATION

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## YEAR END REPORT January 2009 – December 2010

Prepared by  
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# 1. Executive Summary

In the year following Cyclone Nargis, the military government of Burma continues to exert violence over civilians in an attempt to control their activities, committing all manner of human rights abuses against the local population. A steady stream of refugees continues to flow across the border into Thailand where every year hundreds of students come to find safety and an education.

Room to Grow Foundation finds existing boarding house projects in the refugee, IDP and migrant communities and pairs those that are most in need with donor communities abroad to assist children with their basic needs and education. The funding for each project is the minimum required to provide them with a balanced diet, warm clothes and a safe home to sleep in.

Our purpose is to alleviate poverty among unparented<sup>1</sup> children<sup>2</sup> from Burma who have sought refuge in Thailand. We do this through a variety of programs which address a variety of needs from hunger to self expression.

This year we funded programs in eight boarding houses including four in Umphium Mai, one dormitory in Mae Ra Ma Luang, one dormitory in Mae La and two projects



in Mae Sot's migrant area. Two are projects Room to Grow has worked with since 2007, and one is a new project which opened its doors in this to provide a safe space for girls who want to study and get an education in Umphium Mai Refugee Camp.

During the course of the year, we stopped working with two projects, started working with three others and continued to develop good relationships with existing partners.

This year our main focus was on food and shelter. In total, we worked with eight partner programs and our work affected just over 400 children.

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1 The term "unparented" refers to children having no parent or parents or not cared for by parent surrogates

<sup>2</sup> The term children refers to anyone under the age of 18

## 2. Overview

### 2.1 Background and Context

Human rights violations inside Burma continued this year as they have for the past 45 years, resulting in a steady stream of refugees. Human rights violations in Karen State and in other border areas include the



burning of villages and fields, forcing families and students to constantly move or come under the control of the military.

In 2009, rumors of attacks against students returning to their homes during the summer holidays kept many children from seeing their parents and many stayed in the camps rather than risk going home.

Although there have been very few changes in terms of security and politics, one of the most noticeable changes in the situation in the past year has been the steady loss of experienced teachers from the camps. In 2008 and 2009, more people than usual were able to resettle from Umphium and Mae Ra Ma Luang camps, including a great many qualified teachers. Many teachers today are learning on the job and have not received any teacher training. Over the past year, we noticed that more and more students were failing exams and reporting problems with learning. We are continuing to explore this problem and are working towards helping students in the boarding houses get the best education possible within the camps.

## 3. Boarding House Projects

### 3.1 Umphium Boarding Houses

#### 3.1.3 Day Chae's Dormitory

Founded in 2002, this dormitory sheltered just under 80 children from January to April and 61 children from May until the end of December<sup>3</sup>.

The youngest student is nine years old, the oldest 18. In the past, life has been difficult for these children. They have had to



<sup>3</sup> School holidays are in April and many students return home or graduate. The new school year begins in May or June.

forage outside the camp for cabbages left over from nearby crops, or eat what they have found in the jungle.

In monthly reports, the children at Day Chae's dormitory this year have always been eager to talk about what they have eaten for dinner or what they cooked that week for breakfast. A visit to the dormitory in the evening always finds many students studying while others weave on small back strap looms or play marbles in the dust.

The former leader of the boarding house, Day Chae, resettled to a third country and the dorm this year was run by Ta Kee Wah and four volunteers. The volunteers live at the dorm and are responsible for about twenty children each. Each group takes turns to cook and clean and the volunteers meet daily with the children in their charge, encouraging them to study and work hard.

In 2009 Room to Grow supported food at a rate of 5b/child/day from January to December. This amount was supplemented by funds from the Australian charity Women with a Mission<sup>4</sup>, who visited mid-year with our assistance to facilitate their visit. During their time, they agreed to contribute funds towards the salary of the In-Camp Coordinator in return for access to her monthly reports on the dorm. WWM contributed funds through R2G for kitchen and medical supplies which were delivered in mid-October.

To assist students with their studies, R2G provided each student at the dorm with four packages of candles from January to the end of June. From July until December students received three packages of candles and the dormitory received assistance in paying for their electricity and lights.

There were no construction or renovations at the dorm in 2009. These will likely be required in 2010.



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<sup>4</sup> [www.mywwm.org/](http://www.mywwm.org/)





### **3.1.2 Girl's Dorm**

Construction for the Girl's Dormitory began in May 2009 after discussions with an interested supporting community in Canada and with an interested local family in Umphium. The family donated their home for transformation into a boarding house. Construction therefore consisted of new toilets to the building and some additions to the existing house.

When discussing this project with the local community, we were heavily encouraged to include boys in the dorm. "Who will carry the heavy rations?" we were asked.

All children who come across the border have a difficult journey, but for girls, this journey often poses particular risks and dangers.

Providing a safe space for these girls when they arrive is important, as is ensuring that they have equal access to education.

This is the first directly implemented dormitory by Room to Grow and as a result, the funding is far more comprehensive than other projects which were initiated and helped along by local individuals.

The construction finished on time for the new school year and to accept 25 new students. Supplies were purchased for the dormitory including blankets and mosquito nets, as well as kitchen supplies. Food and rice were provided in May. From June until December the dormitory also received funds for charcoal in order to help prepare their food. School opened in June and the girls received four packages of candles each until September. In September the dormitory got access to electricity and the girls received three packages of candles and access to electric lights until 9pm every night.

R2G funds two monthly salaries at the project: Lah Thaw and Yi Yi Aye. As it is recognized that Lah Thaw has many other obligations to her community, Yi Yi Aye is responsible for most of the day to day care for children. She is an older student who assists the younger children with their lessons. Lah Thaw is the boarding house leader for this project and represents the boarding house in the community. With decades of experience as a primary school teacher, she is eminently qualified to manage the boarding house. A respected community leader and a retired educator, she has been an important member of the Room to Grow's team in Umphium this year.

### 3.1.3 Than Hla's Dormitory

Than Hla's Dormitory was Room to Grow's first project with assistance informally provided to the boys living there after a fire destroyed their home in 2007. Today, the dorm houses 20 male students aged 14 to 19. All of the boys are from internally displaced families. Their families remain inside Burma. Some families have set up new homes, some are forced to continually



move due to military activity on the part of the Burmese military regime. These families made a decision to send their boys away from danger, across the border, into the refugee camps in Thailand so that they can be safe and get an education and avoid becoming soldiers.

All the boys at the dorm have expressed a deep commitment to education. All of them would eventually like to return to their families and bring with them what they have learned. Our goal is to ensure that their current living situation is adequate for them to focus on their studies.

One student at the dorm, an 18-year-old boy in his last year of high school named Mya Wa, walked for days through the jungle in order to get across the border. He dreams about attending a post-high school program in the camp to gain more skills for his community in Burma. Another student also finishing high school, Eh Dah, wants to get more health education after high school to help his village once he goes back.

R2G began providing full assistance to the boarding house in August 2009 including food rice, candles and charcoal. The dormitory does not yet have access to electricity.

Than Hla's Dormitory was opened by Mahn Than Hla, who resettled in 2008. the project is currently monitored by a community member who acts as the Boarding House Leader, however most of the day to day running of the dormitory is handled by the boys themselves. Tu Poe is 19 years old and has been in the dormitory for the last two years. He has taken on a leadership role in the boarding house, acting as a leader and role model for the other boys. We have worked closely with him in this capacity over the last year and will continue to do so in the year to come.

### 3.1.4 Kyaw Kyaw's Dormitory

At the beginning of 2009, there were 61 boys and girls staying in this dormitory. All of the children are between the ages of eight and 19. Younger children attend primary school, while older children attend high school or further education programs (often known as 'post-ten schools'). A few of the oldest children who stay at the dormitory have finished their education and work as teachers and medical staff in the camp. They still remain at the boarding house in order that they can contribute and help the children who still stay there as much as they can.



Kyaw Kyaw, the man who started the dormitory, and his wife, took care of children and youth from 2003 until they resettled in 2008. They were both excellent partners for Room to Grow. They were replaced in 2008 and problems began. In 2008 the dormitory experienced a number of difficulties particularly with regards to financial accountability and transparency. The Boarding House Leader responsible resettled at the end of 2008 and was replaced.

In 2009 Saw Tu, a very well respected community member, became the official Boarding House Leader. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that although he had taken on the title, he had passed along his responsibilities to his son, who had passed them along to the daughter in law. The children were told not to discuss any problems they had with the In Camp Coordinator. Several times, the In Camp Coordinator found children in the market begging for food, or accepting food on credit. There was never any solid proof of mis-deeds but the project was failing to put food in the mouths of children. The leaders refused to allow R2G to distribute funds or food in any other method. It would not have been wise to bring accusations against the family member of a respected person in the community like Saw Tu, particularly without evidence, particularly as a foreign organization in camp which relies heavily on community support. We were therefore unable to tell Saw Tu the real reason that we decided not to renew funding for the project for the 2009-2010 school year. During 2009 we explored as many solutions as we could in order to assist the children at the project, and in 2010 we will continue to look out for ways in which we may be able to indirectly, in some way, provide assistance.

## **3.2 Mae Ra Ma Luang**

### **3.2.1. Dormitory G**

The Karen Women Organization (KWO) was formed in 1949 and has been an excellent partner to Room to Grow in 2008 and 2009. The KWO manage seven of the 12 dormitories in Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp, including Dormitory G in Section Four. There are almost 70 children in the dormitory, aged 12 to 20.

KWO chairperson Naw Hla Kyi is responsible for monitoring the project and the dormitory caregiver. KWO Mae Sariang Dormitory Project Co-Coordinator, Naw Ta Mla Saw, is responsible for collecting information from the dormitory and providing quarterly reports. Room to Grow staff visited the project once in 2009 (access, including camp passes and transportation is quite difficult).

Both KWO and Room to Grow are quite satisfied with the situation at Dormitory G. The only problems that have arisen over the year have been budgetary. KWO would like to provide the children at the Dormitory with more than R2G is able to provide (our focus is on food, shelter, blankets, etc; KWO would also like to include uniforms and school fees). Our initial contracts and communications on this matter were perhaps slightly unclear. As a result, we have developed a stronger communication strategy with all local partners when beginning new projects including the signing of a contract with specific budget elements.

Funds transferred in 2008 were used for the first quarter of the 2009 school year for rice, candles and hygiene supplies. In addition, because of budget miscommunications, we re-negotiated with KWO through the year and transferred an additional sum in 2009 to assist primarily with the dormitory's food budget for January, February and March 2009.

At the end of the negotiations, KWO opted to find a different donor for the site who was able to provide more comprehensive funding and R2G decided to provide more focus on activities we could more directly monitor. Funding to this project therefore stopped and there were no new funds for the 2009 – 2010 school year.





### **3.3 Mae La Refugee Camp**

#### **3.3.1. Ler Doh Dormitory**

Ler Doh dormitory, in Mae La refugee camp, was set up in 2008 in response to 50 children from Ler Doh township, Karen State coming to the border to pursue their education. It was originally intended to operate for one year however, the situation in Karen State (and Ler Doh township) continues to worsen, resulting in even more children coming to the border.

The caretakers, teachers and most importantly the students all expressed a wish for this dormitory to continue beyond the year it was established. The students have integrated very well into the community where they are known, loved and invited to attend ceremonies. The team has demonstrated resourcefulness in their abundant vegetable garden, mushrooming, and pig rearing. Within the dormitory, the older students help take care of the younger students and with homework.

This dormitory is managed by Saw Jack and his mother and father who started the boarding house from their home. Last year students in the boarding house achieved some of the highest exam results in camp, partially as a result of the care and attention they receive from their caregivers in the dormitory.

In 2009 Room to Grow initiated discussions with Saw Jack and visited the boarding house. Upon reviewing their proposal, we agreed to provide blankets and mosquito nets to the students, who were suffering a high rate of mosquito-borne diseases at the time (malaria and dengue fever). Our experience with the dormitory has been extremely good and we will look for new ways to work with the project in 2010.

### **3.4 Mae Sot Boarding Houses**

#### **3.4.1. SAW Safe House**

Social Action for Women (SAW) is a Burmese organization in Mae Sot which provides social support to the local community. Their programs cover health, education and social services and reach out to tens of thousands of migrant workers and children in the Mae Sot area.

SAW operates a Safe House for orphaned and abandoned children. There are currently 53 children living in the Safe House. Some arrived as babies, abandoned by their mothers shortly after having been delivered. The average age is five years old although some children are ten to twelve.

R2G provided monthly deliveries of rice to assist in feeding the 53 children at the Safe House. The rice is not the full amount required by the Safe House, who has other donors, but rather the amount requested from SAW. R2G provided deliveries of 360 kilos of rice a month from May to December this year.

### 3.4.2 Agape Orphanage and Boarding House



Agape was the first school in the migrant community that Room to Grow supported. In 2008 the program sheltered 25 students in the dormitory, in 2009 that number doubled. Some come across the river from Burma to come to school, while others actually live on the riverbed that separates Thailand and Burma. Many of the children who stay in the boarding house are formerly street children. Some are orphaned or abandoned. Some are

children of single parents who work in factories and struggle to support themselves. The parents of these children often visit the school in the evenings or on weekends or special occasions. The boarding house provides the only opportunity they have to keep their family together.

In 2009, R2G supported Agape's work in three main areas. We funded the construction of a new boy's dormitory building in April. Material removed from the current building was used to help improve the girl's dormitory building. The building is made primarily of wood, bamboo and thatch. It houses approximately 30 boys and is often used as a classroom for older students during the day.

On October 31<sup>st</sup>, R2G held the first Forgotten Birthdays Party at Agape. The day was intended to make each child in the dormitory feel special for one day. Most of the children do not know when their birthdays are, so this day was chosen for all of them to celebrate together. Funds for the party (total budget just over 8,000b) were primarily donated for this specific purpose by Jennifer Jones and supplemented by another donation by Fred Ligon. No addition funds were required. In addition, members of the Mae Sot community provided many in-kind donations as gifts and the students of the Wide Horizons educational leadership program provided their skills to facilitate games and entertainment. It was a very successful day. Cards with photographs were sent out to everyone who contributed in some way to the party, and this also helped generate discussion about Room to Grow and act as informal publicity.



Throughout 2009, Room to Grow staff made regular visits to Agape to lead after-school programs for the boarding house students including singing and dancing activities.

## 4. Other Programs

### 4.1 Big Brother/Big Sister



The Big Brother/Big Sister program pairs leadership students from the English Immersion Program with children in the boarding house. They meet on weekends for games and activities. In addition, the older students help the younger students with their homework and act as leaders and mentors for them. In 2009, the program took place over 5 weeks with children in Day Chae's Dormitory. Students in EIP and in the dormitory all expressed enjoyment of the program.

### 4.2 Photofriend

Photofriend is a program which provides refugee children with digital cameras in order to allow them to document their lives and express what is important to them. It was initiated by Su-Ann Oh in 2007. Unfortunately, Dr. Oh has not had the chance to sufficiently document the program. She worked together with EIP teacher Nisha Toomey in 2009 to run the program. This year the results were not particularly good either in terms of photographs or in terms of information from the students. The children, however, reported very much enjoying the ability to learn about and use digital cameras.

### 4.3 Blanket Project

The question of sustainability is one which began to occupy R2G in 2009 and one response to the question of how to support large numbers of children over a long time is the Blanket Project. The project proposes to work with women from SAW to sew patchwork blankets from local textiles for sale abroad. In 2009, we organized a sewing training for two days and women began producing simple blankets using two or four colors and square pieces. These blankets were sold in Canada over the holiday period. This program will continue in 2010, with an aim towards developing both the sewers' skills and the quality of the blankets produced.

## 5. New Program Proposals

### 5.1 Overview

In 2008, R2G investigated several programs with an eye towards expanding our reach. After reviewing the information collected in Mae Sot, the Directors decided to act conservatively with regards to the future and opted to strengthen existing relationships rather than begin new ones. Information was kept for future reference.

### 5.2 KWO District (Nu Poe Refugee Camp)

**Contact information:** Rosalind, KWO Boarding House Coordinator (Mae Sot). Ph. 084-821-8840

There are 128 children currently living in this dormitory, under the care of KWO. Currently the dorm has no outside supporters and receives some emergency food support through the Mae Tao Clinic's dry food fund. The KWO is requesting a budget of 7baht per child per day and has made a full proposal for the dormitory. Upon reviewing the proposal, we found it to be quite different from the KWO proposal for Dormitory G, particularly in terms of the costs charged by KWO for monitoring and evaluating the project.

### 5.3 Pah Bu Lah Tah (IDP Community near Umphang)

PBLT is a village established in 2000 by IDPs who had been forced from their homes and villages by soldiers. There is still a somewhat serious military presence in the area. Villages not far from PBLT are visited by both SPDC and DKBA soldiers, however little military activity has occurred in the past years and the villagers feel relatively safe where they are now. Most are agricultural workers growing corn and peanuts. One testament to how safe villagers feel is the growing number of permanent residences. People are starting to put down roots in the village. As a safe place, it is ideally suited for schools and children are drawn there to continue their education, hence the need for boarding facilities.

The proposed boarding house would be built and managed by Nanna, a well known community worker who has good relationships with Help Without Frontiers and members of Mae Tao Clinic. The proposed building would house 20 students (8 male and 12 female) attending grades five through seven at the local middle school.





The project could be done in conjunction with Help Without Frontiers who has a commitment to the community and travels there often. HWF has already completed a project to place latrines in every household in the village.

#### **5.4 Hsa Mu Htaw**

**Contact information:** Daw Htet Htet Aung (084-578-7510) or Daw Khin Mar Mar Aye (084-735-0116)

HMH started in May 2003 with three teachers and 50 students. Today, there are 5 teachers and 118 students. The school started because one of the men who is currently a teacher was once a factory worker. He noticed that at the factory where he worked, there were many children, just hanging around, following their parents to work because they had no one to care for them during the day and not enough money for school fees or uniforms. So the man, who has a geography degree from a university in Rangoon, left the factory and started a school where children didn't have to pay fees or wear a uniform. He started teaching the children of factory workers and now also teaches many children of agricultural laborers.

There are 28 boarding students at the school (15 male and 13 female). The parents are low income migrant workers. Many work in factories or farms. The nature of the work is very instable and so many parents move around several times during a year, meaning that their children's education is disrupted often. Sometimes the children cannot get into a new school in the new location of the parent's work, or are delayed from doing so for several months. This boarding house targets those students and enables them to get a full year of stable schooling without disruption.

This will be the boarding house's first year of operations. The buildings are finished and are of concrete. The program's main needs are for food.

#### **5.5 Other Projects**

**Contact information:** Anne ([annepomu@yahoo.com](mailto:annepomu@yahoo.com) 089-916-5855)

Anne is a staff member of Mae Tao Clinic responsible for some boarding houses near Mae Sot. After approaching MTC for recommendations on boarding houses in need of assistance she recommended three projects: Wat Si Ka, Nah Li Ah Tah and Maw Taw Lu.

Currently some funding for food is available through MTC for these projects. All three projects are on the Thai side, but near the border. The first is near the bridge in Mae Sot, the others are further north near Mae Ramat. All are boarding houses for primary students which have been established for around two years. They have had a little support from BMWEC for some building supplies but everything has been really patchy and last minute. Anne herself visits the projects once a month but communication with her has not been steady and clear information as to budgets and needs has been slow.

## 6. Staff

In May 2009 Corthanaw Phawn Awar completed her first full year of work with Room to Grow. As a reward for a full year of work, we provided her with a one month bonus. As incentive to continue working with us, we provided her with a 20% raise. She has been the most stable and reliable staff member in Umphium and any success we have there can be directly attributed to her work and her ability to easily monitor all the projects. Corthanaw makes a regular effort to speak and connect with the children in each project and in this way has provided us with valuable information as to the real circumstances that children face in their daily lives. We hope to continue working with Corthanaw for a long time to come.



In 2009 Jennifer Jones was able to provide her time on a part-time basis while also accepting work as a consultant in Mae Sot. She was provided with a stipend for her work of a total of 12,000b for the year 2010. Her main role is in gathering information, monitoring existing projects, investigating new projects, communicating with the Board of Directors and writing reports. In addition, she worked on the application for Charitable Status.



## **7. Administration**

### **7.1 Charitable Status**

In 2009, Room to Grow's application for Charitable Status was rejected and the CRA provided several points which required amending for the application to go through. With advice from a volunteer lawyer in Mae Sot, we were able to successfully amend our application. This included refining our mission and objectives, re-working our agreements with the KWO, and providing documentation to the CRA of our financial practices and accountability.

In June 2009, the CRA awarded R 2 G Children's Foundation charitable status. Our fiscal year ends on December 31<sup>st</sup> and we are currently working towards our first income tax return and financial statement.

### **7.2 Board of Directors**

Following the announcement of charitable status, the Board of Directors held a meeting in July to confirm members of the board, and to read and confirm the Foundation's by-laws. The by-laws were unanimously accepted and signed. Sandra Jones was voted and confirmed as Chairperson. Graham Jones was voted and confirmed as Treasurer. Three other directors are: Jennifer Allore, Jennifer Jones and Su-Ann Oh, Room to Grow's founders.

### **7.3 Expenses**

In 2009, a total of 4.85% of all expenses were spent on items solely related to the administration of projects. This largely includes the salary of the In-Camp Coordinator. Other costs include photocopying and postage and expenses related to communication with donors.

The financial report indicates a discrepancy of approximately \$300 CDN. The report has yet to be presented and discussed at the Annual General Meeting. It is expected that the discrepancy arose from the way in which currency calculations were made. The Treasurer has been asked to explore a more efficient system for accounting for 2010 and to suggest ways to improve communications between operations in Thailand and the office in Canada.

## 8. Conclusion

On a limited budget raised from a few private donors, R2G was able to make several notable successes over the past year. We were able to assist with the provision of basic necessities for just over 400 children along the Thai-Burma border in Mae Ra Ma Luang, Mae La and Umphium Refugee Camps and in the community around Mae Sot. We faced some hard decisions, particularly regarding some of our partners and terminated some of our old projects. As well, we made new partnerships and started new projects in new areas. We investigated projects for expansion although we have held back on moving too quickly into new areas at this point in time. Room to Grow is growing slowly but surely and made a big step this year in being granted Charitable Status by Revenue Canada. We hope this will lead to growth in fundraising and programs which will allow us to support more programs and assist more children in 2010.

