

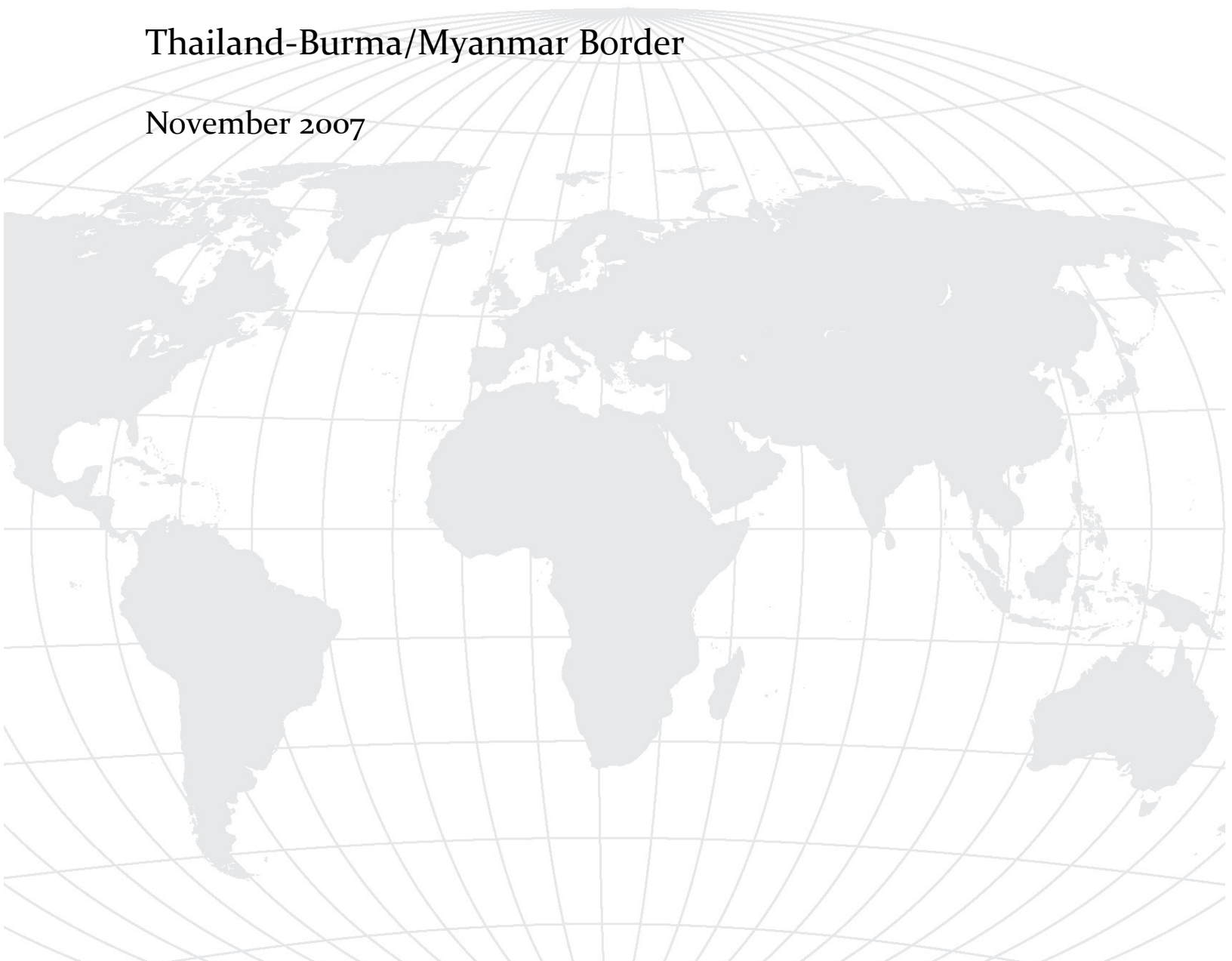
# LISTENING PROJECT

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## Field Visit Report

Thailand-Burma/Myanmar Border

November 2007



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

**These documents do not represent a final product of the project.** While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

## **Background on the Listening Project**

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, with a number of colleagues in international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, has established the Listening Project to undertake a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts. The Listening Project seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by various international actors. Those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, peace-building efforts, environmental conservation, and human rights work can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and suggestions of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such efforts.

The Listening Teams were made up of staff from international and local aid agencies, with facilitators from CDA. We did not use pre-established questionnaires or a rigid interview protocol. Rather, we told people that, as individuals engaged in international assistance work, we were interested to hear from them how they perceived these efforts. We asked if they would be willing to spend some time with us, telling us their opinions and ideas. In this way, we conversed about their issues of concern, without pre-determining specific topics.

Many conversations were held with one or two individuals, but in some cases, larger groups formed and what began as small-group dialogues became, in effect, free-flowing group discussions. In most cases, conversations were not pre-arranged (except for appointments with government officials and other key stakeholders). A Listening Team would travel to a community and strike up a conversation with whomever was available and willing to talk, speaking both to people who had and had not received international assistance.

Over a period of three years, the Listening Project will visit up to twenty locations, with the Burmese refugee camps in Thailand being the 12<sup>th</sup> location so far. The Project will gather what we hear from people in all of these locations in order to integrate these insights into future aid work and, thereby, to improve its effectiveness.

A collaborative learning process such as the Listening Project depends entirely on the people who took time to share their thoughts with us, and on the involvement and significant contributions of all the participating agencies. Those staff and community members who were involved in and around the refugee camps in Thailand deserve great appreciation for their generous support, insights, and dedication. We especially commend the many refugees who spoke frankly about their experiences and perceptions about receiving international aid over the last 23 years. A special thanks is also due to the numerous Karen elders and leaders who took time to read the entire report and share their reflections, many of which have been added in the “reflections” sections.

## **The Listening Project on the Thai-Burma/Myanmar Border in Thailand**

The Listening Project collaborated with local community based organizations (CBOs) from Burmese refugee camps in Thailand in November 2007 to conduct a five-day Listening Exercise.

The Listening Exercise was generously hosted by the Karen Women's Organization, and additional local CBOs volunteered time and staff as Listening Team members, including the Karen Education Department, Karen Youth Organization, Karen Human Rights Group, and the Tak Border Child Assistance Foundation (TBCAF) with the support of the Taipei Overseas Peace Service (TOPS). The latter group listened to people in Thai villages bordering refugee camps to learn more about their perceptions of the impact of refugee-centered aid efforts.

Six of the eight Listening Team members belonged to the refugee population themselves, and represented a refugee community based organization (CBO) working in the refugee camps. One Thai-Karen team member participated in conversations in villages near refugee camps, and one foreign facilitator from the Listening Project organized the initial training, the daily debriefs and reflections, and participated in conversations with camp and village residents.

The Listening Teams visited Mae La Camp, with a population of 50,000 and Umpiem Mai camp, with a population of 20,000. Both camps have a similar demographic make-up, composed mainly of ethnic Karen, but with a significant population of Muslims from Burma/Myanmar. The residents in the camp include Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists with a small minority of Hindus, while the camp leadership is predominantly Christian.

Three Listening Teams of two to three persons each held around 58 conversations with 70 people, making an effort to reach across ethnic and religious lines to talk to different people in the two refugee camps. Team members spoke with people of all religions: leaders in the community, including from the Karen Refugee Committee, the Karen Women's Organization, members of the Karen Education Department and various Karen youth organizations. We also spoke with self-employed and unemployed refugees, religious leaders, teachers, students, stay-at-home mothers and randomly-selected camp residents. Given that Team members had or still lived in the refugee camps, they also spoke with friends still living in the camps. The majority of conversations took place in camps, informally, avoiding pre-arranged focus groups. Some conversations took place in Mae Sot town, where leaders and staff of refugee-led community based organizations are based. Conversations also took place with Karen staff working in international agencies as well as with foreign aid workers who had long-term experience working on the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border. A small number of conversations took place in Bangkok with representatives of international assistance agencies, including various United Nations agencies.

Listening Team members were very enthusiastic to spend time in the camps talking to their fellow community members about the impacts of foreign assistance. There was a sense that they were given an opportunity to be heard, and despite cultural norms of avoiding critical commentary, Team members returned to the daily debrief sessions with insightful and critical comments from their fellow camp residents. This report identifies general themes and patterns from these conversations, which were held mostly by refugees with refugees. The process was full and careful but cannot of course represent the full spectrum of perspectives on the impacts of aid on the refugee communities and camps on the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border.

## **History and Context of Aid to Refugee Camps on the Thai-Burma/Myanmar Border**

Refugee camps have been managed by the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC), the elected bodies for the refugees living in the camps, since their inception almost 25 years ago. They oversee all camp activities through Camp Committees and coordinate assistance from International NGOs, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Royal Thai Government. When the camps were first formed in 1984, there was no United Nations agency present and only a few humanitarian NGOs. Refugee camps resembled settled villages in Thailand, with refugees paying rent to Thai land-owners for use of the land. Refugees could travel outside the camps and, although at risk of arrest, were able to travel freely enough to purchase supplies from nearby towns and to find local work.

In addition to the KRC, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) has been working in the refugee camps since their inception, and prior to this time in Karen State in Burma/Myanmar. They implement various social service programs focused on addressing the needs of women and children as well as conducting research, documentation, and advocacy. Other community based organizations such as the Karen Education Committee, Karen youth groups (Karen Youth Organization and the Karen Student Network Group) and other CBOs have also been functioning in the camps for decades. They founded these CBOs independently of outside aid efforts, which came into the camps over a decade after the camps were formed and then began to link to these existing CBOs. The only exception is the presence of medical NGOs, which provided basic health care early on in the refugee camps, and the Thailand Burma/Myanmar Border Consortium (then the Burma/Myanmar Border Consortium), which provided rice and some non-food items (blankets and mosquito nets) to refugees, but acted through the Karen Refugee Committee.

Unique to the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border camps is the fact that camp management has been the responsibility of the Karen and Karenni Refugee Committees, not the UNHCR, which did not officially work in the camps until 1999. UNHCR's mandate is limited to protection and does not include its usual role in camp coordination and management.

In 1984, aid to refugees by the Thai Burma Border Consortium alone totaled 3 million Thai Baht (US \$120,000). In 2007, the total was 1.2 billion Thai Baht (US \$35.4 million with adjusted exchange rate). During this time, the population of the camps increased from 9,500 to 163,000. The per-refugee ratio of funding also rose from 350 Baht (US\$ 14) per refugee per year, to approximately 7,374 Thai Baht (US\$ 217) per refugee, per year. During this time, the food basket for refugees increased from three staple items (rice, fish paste, salt) to around eight items, with additional non-food items such as house-building supplies and cooking fuel. The increase in aid is largely due to restrictions on refugees' movements outside the camps that had previously allowed them to supplement their diets by foraging in nearby forests or earning cash income from work in Thailand.<sup>1</sup> Due to limited space in the camps, refugees are also unable to plant or raise livestock. As a result, dependency on aid agencies has increased for refugees over the years.

When refugees quoted in this report refer to "before," they are talking about the time period when the ethnic nationalities still had control of the border areas and international NGO activity

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics for this paragraph are calculated from data provided by the TBBC Programme Report: January to June 2007.

was limited. During this time, leadership of social initiatives was in the hands of the refugees and the structures they had developed to manage social assistance interventions. “After” refers to the time period from 1995 onwards, when the Burmese army took tentative control of the border areas and security became a major concern, with frequent cross-border attacks. The Thai government responded by consolidating camps to contain and restrict refugees’ movement, thus increasing their dependency. As they lost their territory, they also lost some of their economic independence and looked to NGOs for more support. At this time, more international NGOs with a wider range of programming entered the camps. Finally, the majority of the time that camp residents used the term “NGO” it was to describe international NGO (INGO) efforts, including Thai NGOs.

## **What People Said**

### **I. Gratitude for Outside Aid**

Most refugees the Listening Teams spoke with were clear that life in the refugee camps was far better than life in Burma/Myanmar. They felt that in Burma/Myanmar they had nothing, and that the government not only failed to take any responsibility for providing services and protecting them but also was a source of abuse. Refugees gratefully acknowledged that without international assistance they would have nothing. As one Karen leader stated, “The NGOs come and help us. We should show appreciation and gratitude. Compared to the other side (Burma/Myanmar), here, there is something; there, there is nothing.”

A middle-aged woman taking non-formal education classes stated, “We are happy that the family gets food and can survive and the children can go to school for free and get health care for free. In Burma/Myanmar we have to pay for everything.”

Two camp leaders noted the changes in the nature of aid since the refugee camps began in 1984, saying, “At first there were religious organizations, now there are big international ones. Now the standard of living is better. In the beginning we just had [two health-focused international NGOs]. Now we have educational ones and other health NGOs and vocational training.”

### **II. Lack of Consultation and Coordination with Refugee-Managed Organizations**

The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and Karen Women’s Organization (KWO) are structures intended to be the central internal management and implementation system in the camps, and the main bodies for organizing external aid efforts. People we spoke with felt that these entities and other local community-based organizations (CBOs) had vast experience and understanding of the cultural, social, and political dynamics of the camps and their populations. Despite this, many refugees expressed a sense that international NGOs enter the camps and act independently of these structures, failing to communicate and coordinate with them, undermining the refugee leadership.

People were frustrated with the lack of meaningful consultation between representatives of NGOs and the United Nations (UN) and the camp-based CBOs and refugees when planning a needs assessment or project. Refugees felt that aid agency representatives did not properly

communicate their purpose, did not allow enough time for the camp residents to feel ownership of the process, and did not involve the community as a whole. People were also concerned that NGO staff did not have enough background and understanding of Karen culture to comprehend the communication styles used by refugees to express likes and dislikes. The lack of coordination with camp structures and among NGOs also resulted in project duplication, which caused confusion among refugees as to which organization was responsible for which issue (child protection, preventing violence against women, income generation, agriculture, etc.) and concern that valuable funds were being wasted.

#### **A. Lack of Meaningful Consultation with CBOs and Camp Structures**

“There is no open dialogue with community leaders. Include community leaders in dialogue with NGOs... Have the full participation for the community before projects start—have open dialogue at every step.”

*Karen female CBO leader*

“Consultation with the community and CBOs is very important...CBOs represent the community and communities respect the CBOs...When NGOs consult with just a few people, the community thinks they are only visiting—they don’t feel it is a consultation. Sometimes the NGOs don’t give the real perspective that they are there to do a consultation... then it results in projects in the community... Without real consultation, projects will be duplicated with the CBO. When there is duplication, supplies are not enough either. We need to meet and discuss and coordinate from the beginning. This way we can use the money for what is needed.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“Before, NGOs want to work directly with Camp Committees; they tell them to go to KRC (the central coordinating body)... It is not a fine relation with NGOs. We don’t know how to work with the NGOs... They just come and set up their projects. Some CBOs already have projects and NGOs come and do the same thing... To avoid this, NGOs should go through the right channels (KRC/ Camp Committees) like they used to before 2000 – when many NGOs came in. In the beginning they should go through one channel... For example, [one NGO] has a child protection project and [another NGO] does awareness-raising on the rights of the child. They should combine together, it’s better to organize this in the camps. Every activity to do with children should go through one NGO and the work will be done better... One NGO acts like ‘this is my project’ and there are problems with other NGOs... We have to give each project time, they are complicated... NGOs get money from donors to do similar projects – this wastes the donors’ money... They give similar trainings. This problem is true of the SGBV (Sexual and Gender Based Violence) projects. The SGBV program and [an NGO’s] GBV programs don’t coordinate.”

*Karen male and female camp leaders*

“The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) always asks that people (NGOs) inform KRC. Instead they go around them...People in the camps feel that NGOs ask them to do things without working together deeply with the people... Some NGOs meet with the people for only one to two days and then decide and don’t really understand the real situation and what people need.”

*Karen Buddhist male teacher and Camp Committee member*

“We have to have a stronger voice and opinions from the community. We want real partnership; for this we must always have open dialogue and mutual respect... The CBOs should not look like service providers or staff for NGOs. CBOs should have more role and voice for social change.”

*Karen female CBO leader*

“We can’t survive without aid, but the NGOs must approach the camp community very carefully. NGOs come and ask: ‘what do you need?’ But they don’t think to do it the right way. Then a few people ask for things that don’t interest the whole community... Only a few people are consulted.”

*Karen female school teacher*

## **B. Lack of Consultation and Coordination between External Agencies**

“NGOs focus on children’s rights and then another NGO does the same thing in the same camp. This makes it difficult for the Camp Committee. One is already there working with the people and hiring the people. Then the other one also hires people. If the NGOs work together or hand over the work to one main NGO, that would be better and it would save money.”

*Karen Camp Committee members*

“We already have income generation in the camps and we look for markets and then [an NGO] does a micro-credit project on income generation and women will have to pay back with interest. Women don’t want to weave but use the money for the home. Then they cannot repay and it makes a problem for everyone... [an NGO] loans them only for weaving and does not help them with markets to pay back the loan. We worry that they will hand that project over to us and we won’t know how to look for the market—they want to work there and come and disturb us. We want them to cooperate with us because we are already doing IGP (Income Generation Projects). Even though the purpose is to help the people and cooperate with us, they don’t cooperate with us. They go and give their own training and we worry that our people in the camp and our weaving and sewing women will leave and join them because there they get a loan. Also, they pay them for the training and we cannot.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“Two NGOs are doing agricultural training... If we do two projects it costs twice as much. We can use that money in other ways.”

*Karen male Camp Committee member*

## **C. Top-Down Approach**

Some CBOs felt that the lack of consultation in a true spirit of partnership was reflected in NGO donors’ demands that were excessive and limited the time and effort CBOs could devote to help communities. Rather than being helpful, some NGO donors’ demands were seen as counterproductive to maximizing assistance to the people. There was a sense that NGO demands were top-down “orders” and that power relations between the givers and receivers were being exploited by the givers.

“NGOs have an attitude that you have to do what we tell you. They act like this is a donation we should be grateful for. Like it is a relationship where they are powerful and we are not... They tell us what to do, and how to do it or they threaten to cut off funding... We are not stupid, we know they need us to make money... So we threaten them back that this relationship is becoming untenable. There is not enough listening and understanding of local leadership skills and local coping skills. It feels like projects are becoming funder-driven.”

*Foreign aid worker with long-term experience working in local CBOs*

“When the money arrives to the NGOs—they come and give orders about how we have to do things.”

*Karen Camp Committee member*

“We feel like NGOs come and order us to do things this way or that—because they have a lot of power... We don’t see a lot of working together with CBOs in a meaningful way... We want to discuss together, decide together.”

*Karen woman leader in camp*

“To get the money, there are many meetings, signatures, and delays. I don’t want to work like that... So many meetings take us away from our work. With our own projects we can decide what is feasible. What works and what does not. This is too stressful. Donors need to be flexible, understand the situation and limitations... like our work inside Burma/Myanmar. Delays don’t mean the project is not a success.”

*Karen women’s leader*

### ***Reflections of the Listening Team***

A Karen participant reflecting on these issues noted that Karen leaders on the ground are concerned that aid does not go through them and that NGOs compete with each other. She added that refugees themselves don’t have a sense of this. They think all the foreigners and aid come from one source. There is a lack of knowledge on their part that NGO A and NGO B are not the same. She also added that people in the camps feel that “They give us food and fund us and if we don’t do as they say they will stop helping us.” Therefore a top-down approach is tolerated.

A Karen elder noted that the issues of consultation and coordination also have a cultural element. She stated that, “It is a good idea to learn how the people in each culture view themselves - do they see themselves as strong, weak, positive, sad, do they value humor, do they value talking about their ideas, or do they feel it is rude to talk about their ideas?...In the case of the Karen, it is valuable to provide help with the guidance of community leaders.” Community leaders are expected to discuss ideas, whereas a camp resident may be embarrassed to do so. She added, “An external assistance group that by-passes this process undermines what is of value to the community.” By better understanding the culture, aid workers can also understand what meaningful consultation looks like to a Karen refugee community. In one of the quotations above, a committee leader notes that a day or two consultation is not enough to understand what the community needs, or for the community to feel properly consulted. This is important

information for foreign aid workers who often consider several days of consultation sufficient to identify needs and establish a partnership.

### **III. International NGOs Taking Over Local Initiatives**

Refugees expressed frustration with international NGOs (here referred to as NGOs) for not acknowledging or valuing the long-term aid efforts of CBOs working in the camps or the expertise of refugees. They stated that they had been in the camps from the beginning, struggling to help their people. “We know them, know the culture and know the problems in a way you (foreigners) cannot.” This sentiment has been intensified by the aforementioned lack of consultation with local CBOs and leaders who have managed projects or worked with their community for many years. Refugees were concerned that by not consulting those local structures that have the respect of the people, aid workers are undermining local leadership, respect and authority, and contributing to a perception that NGOs want to take over, reinvent or give their name, management and control to existing camp-based projects. This was particularly true of projects that have been managed by the refugees for many years. There was a sense that the NGOs want to control the projects completely, with refugees as their “helpers,” “assistants,” and “staff,” rather than the managers of their own vision and efforts.

Some people Listening Teams spoke with noted that there had been a change in the respect and leadership exercised by the camp leaders and camp based organizations from the early days of minimal NGO intervention (1984 to the mid-1990s) to the following years when NGO presence increased drastically. During the latter time, the issue of “taking over” of local initiatives arose.

NGO efforts are also perceived to be undermining the loyalty of the Karen people to Karen community initiatives and CBOs. As outside aid agencies come in and create their own programs, bringing resources that refugee organizations cannot compete with, Karen CBOs have lost their staff to much better-paying outside agencies. As a result, these skilled people who once served an important function to the refugee community no longer give time and effort to their local organizations, contributing to a sense that the outsiders are now running the camps.

#### **A. Lack of Recognition and Partnership**

A number of refugees voiced frustration that they were becoming “helpers” and “staff” of their own assistance projects. There was a sense that NGOs wanted to take over what people in the camps were trying to do, or had already been leading.

“Before, everything was in our hands, but not now... Now they are not sharing information with us; this makes us feel like they are keeping us like workers only. We feel like we are not respected and it hurts our self-esteem... Before we made decisions together; now they dictate from outside. This was not our plan. We are like a puppet. Before we have ownership and make decisions, we know the situation ourselves. We wrote our own report before, not now. The NGOs come in and take over, we feel like we are nothing. I feel that this happens a lot – the donors/NGOs take over ownership.”

*Karen man working in an externally-funded initiative that changed from being Karen-led to being foreign-led*

“We feel that they want to control our work. They say we work together, but later we feel like what we do belongs to them and is not for us.”

*Karen male leader of local aid initiative “taken over” by an international NGO*

“Now there is a shift in the NGOs to “livelihood” or “micro-credit.” All NGOs are doing these projects... But local women’s NGOs have been doing these projects for years. They wrote a letter to [the NGO coordinating body] to recognize that income generation-programs have been going on in the camps for many years and many lessons have been learned... NGOs hire outside “experts” on income generation. The expert did not talk to the women’s groups, did not come to the income-generation shops, he did not consider the realities of doing income generation in a refugee setting... He did not consider the skills people had, or how to link the market with the skills. We have not seen the impact of this yet.”

*Foreign aid worker with long-term experience working in local CBOs*

“We have a lot of experience in our community. They [NGOs] might have good school and education, but little experience. Then when we give them our experience, they ignore it.”

*Karen women’s leader*

“After we have repatriated, we don’t want the NGOs to come to us. They can wait at the river bank. We won’t accept their funding. Now we want to implement ourselves and they can monitor by themselves.”

*Karen women’s leader*

## **B. Specific Projects Lacking Coordination and Partnership**

Following are numerous examples of how projects that were founded and run by refugees were being taken over by outside NGOs, who would hire Karen staff to work for “their” (outsider) NGO projects.

“We have been running a safe house for five years. We did not get enough funding for it. [An international organization] wants to set up a safe house. They look to [two NGOs] to do it. [The two NGOs] come and talk to the camp directly. They should talk to the management body. They don’t consult very well; they write a proposal including our salaries without consulting us. We are very surprised and upset by that. We feel like we don’t have enough human resources. But if they talk to us we can explain our needs. We try to set up meetings. [One of the NGOs] never showed us the proposal. We call meetings with [the NGOs and the funding agency] and tell them the safe house is our program. We want to write the proposal ourselves.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“We don’t want to be controlled by the NGOs. We want to work together when necessary, but not all the time. We want to be independent... We feel like they tell us what to do. At first they want to build the safe house on their own. They have a lot of money. We don’t want to create problems to have a nice [NGO run] safe house with salary... They don’t want to support our safe house. They should know we have safe houses, we send them reports. They want to control the safe houses themselves... This is because they think the CBOs don’t have enough capacity and

may not trust them with the money. This is bad. In order to empower refugees, they need to support them. When they don't do this, they disempower us. We feel frustrated like we don't want to work (with them.)”

*Karen Women's Organization representative*

“When NGOs implement their projects, teachers feel like they don't belong to the community but to the NGO. Then the teachers rely more on the NGO to solve their problems. This takes away the power of the CBO, and makes the CBOs weak. If there are conflicts among teachers they now ignore the CBOs. They think the NGO will fight for them.”

*Karen female educator*

“The NGOs push us to do a curriculum and framework. It felt like we were being pushed, but now things are working out... We discuss and try to compromise... If we have the resources, we can do it our way... If we do it our way, it would take a long time, because we don't have the resources... The NGOs on their own decided on the teaching method without an education person from the community and without the Karen Education Committee. We feel bad... Teacher trainings are done by NGOs. It would have been better to support Karen Education Department to do the teacher trainings.”

*Karen male education leader commenting on entry of NGOs in '97 into the pre-existing Karen-run education system in the camps*

“We stay among the refugees; they support us. We do safe houses since 1993, it's our program, and we want to implement it ourselves. We know the needs of the community... I have lived in the camp for 10 years and have lots of experience with NGOs. I feel very sad. We have well-trained medics, with 10 years experience with IDPs in Burma/Myanmar. Then the foreign doctor comes and they don't discuss or take advice from those medics.”

*Karen women's representative*

### **C. Empowering Refugee-Led Community Based Organizations**

Empowering CBOs to lead and manage programs was raised repeatedly as the right role for outside NGOs.

“There needs to be a long time commitment on both sides. Since the NGO cannot stay that long, you need to support and strengthen local CBOs...NGO staff cannot stay in the country for a long time. They want to go home, see their family, get more education—they have their own objectives...So if you want to improve the community you have to provide equal access and resources to the community.”

*Karen female CBO leader*

“The ideal role of NGOs is to support from behind. They should support what the community really needs. We need them to do some services. But for education, we can do most of it ourselves. Some things they should support us so we can do them ourselves.”

*Karen male education leader*

“We want NGOs to ask CBOs—how can we support you? This is the best approach... NGOs can fill urgent needs if we cannot do it.”

*Karen women’s representative*

“It’s important to recognize what people (Karen refugees and IDPs) are doing already—build on that... don’t allow them to think that they are the victims who need saving by foreign NGOs.”

*Foreign male founder of local NGO*

#### **D. Resource Differential between NGOs and Refugee-Led Organizations (CBOs)**

A source of repeated concern was the impact of the resource differential between NGOs and local refugee CBOs on the leadership and sustainability of CBO initiatives and on the value placed on CBO work. With outside NGOs being able to pay salaries that refugee CBOs cannot, many refugees are leaving their local CBOs to join the parallel NGO-established programs. This was seen as another way that outside NGOs are undermining and taking over local projects and community initiatives. The tendency of NGOs to pay much more for the same work if it is done by their staff or an outside NGO rather than a local camp-based CBO also generated the sense that NGOs do not respect and value the work of local CBOs. The lack of consultation by NGOs about how to address problems related to the resource differential was also of concern to refugees. Finally, some refugees felt that funds were wasted and they disapproved of how foreign aid workers used funds on excessive or “luxury” spending.

“We want to discuss with the NGOs how much they should pay (people in the camps). When they pay people more, they take away the community from the CBO... The community members now feel like they are NGO staff, and don’t feel their loyalty to the community. This is very sad. They are paid by the NGO and feel they belong to that NGO. They don’t feel anymore they belong to the camps... Their values and loyalty change. It’s important to work for NGOs to fulfill NGO needs, but now these staff left our meetings for their NGO work. We lose the people who have skills and experience to the NGOs... NGOs should support CBOs—we work for free. They could fund CBOs, otherwise the CBOs could collapse. We feel the NGOs don’t support us. They take away the people and set up their own project.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“They pay low wages. Refugee NGO workers in the camp have to work harder than the outside NGO workers. I feel that outside NGO workers have fewer responsibilities than the ones in the camp. But the outside NGO workers get more than the refugee workers. I want the donors to come and make the payment fair--to make a balance between the camp refugee CBO workers and legal/outside the camp NGO workers (Thai).”

*Karen Camp Committee member*

“Workers in the NGO office get 2,000 Baht per month, some drivers get 10,000 Baht. Why don’t they give teachers more? They teach all day and get 500 Baht per month. They leave looking for better pay. Asking is like throwing a stone in the water.”

*Karen male elder and leader in education*

“We have a GBV [Gender Based Violence] representative. They should pay the GBV committee member the same amount as the one who does the same job for the community. One could pay them 50% NGO and 50% CBO. By not paying the CBO staff it shows they don’t value community work, like it is different or less than NGO work... They should talk to the community to ask what is fair to pay. If NGOs don’t pay the same there is competition and no stable work force as people move for a better paying job. It’s very important that we have stable work- its not like there is a job for everyone here. Because of aid from NGOs the local organizations can’t run anymore because [NGO] people are paid better—at [our CBO], volunteers are not paid at all so they join other NGOs that come and help. So [our CBO] lost people.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

The differential in resources between CBOs and NGOs was also commented on by refugees in terms of wastage of funds or as a commentary on the priorities of NGOs in spending funds on the running of the NGO, rather than direct assistance to refugees.

“Of the 100 Baht for a refugee, how much reaches the refugees? The NGOs have brand new cars, salaries, they sit in the bar and coffee shop at night; they send the children to Bangkok to expensive schools, have nice houses and big rent... We don’t understand this...I don’t understand why again and again they buy the brand new cars, but when the refugees ask for aid, they say there is no budget.”

*Karen women’s leader*

### ***Reflections of the Listening Team***

Listening Team members felt strongly that NGOs had not respected the work, expertise and understanding of Karen people and their projects in the camps. Repeatedly Karen leaders asked to be the contact point for information and projects going on in “their” camps and repeatedly they felt this request was ignored.

In 2007, a group of refugees and concerned aid workers formed the “CBO Forum on Humanitarian Assistance” in order for CBOs to agree on a common set of guidelines. As a result, the group outlined and adopted eight humanitarian principles including a requirement that assistance programs be based on real humanitarian needs and involve community participation; that local resources be used in order to facilitate sustainable development; that personnel and coordinating organizations adhere to the principles of accountability and transparency and promote democratic processes; and that aid and assistance programs not discriminate, or cause harm, injury or conflict to communities.

One participant noted that the CBO Forum, although a response to the critical issues raised in this section, can be a tool for building common ground among the CBOs, which will in turn strengthen their ability to negotiate effectively and work collaboratively with (international) NGOs. She noted, “without people on the inside being on the same page, how can we work well with people from the outside? The CBOs are taking the initiative to strengthen themselves so that they have the capacity and the confidence to work more effectively and collaboratively with NGOs. The attitude is not one of asking NGOs to change so much as CBOs showing everyone

what we are capable of, and through this, the way others think of us and behave will change as well.”

#### **IV. Imposition of Outside Values and Priorities**

Repeatedly, camp residents and leaders voiced concern over NGOs’ lack of understanding of the context and culture of the refugees and camps. This lack of understanding was faulted for serious miscommunications that resulted in inappropriate projects that did not meet “real needs” or negative treatment of refugee populations and staff. Specific examples were cited in which differences in culture and values were problematic, including integrating different teaching styles into the existing education system, disciplining students and children, and teaching about sex education and gender. Often it was not the new idea that was problematic, as much as the way in which it was introduced. The lack of consultation, the speed at which new ideas were expected to be assimilated by refugees, and the lack of understanding about what is needed to affect social change, were all mentioned as frustrations in the process of receiving outsider-driven ideas and projects.

##### **A. Not Contextualizing Aid Efforts to Local Situation**

“If NGOs want to work in refugee camps, first they must study about the culture of the people they want to work with, like anthropology.”

*Karen women’s leader*

“NGOs need to have cultural awareness training for the areas where they are sending them. They need a clear understanding of the economics there and how everything differs from what they are used to.”

*Karen male aid worker*

“NGOs don’t know the real situation in the camps and you (foreigners) don’t know how to talk to them to help them or their way of learning or experiencing their work... NGOs don’t think of where the people come from, or consider their culture or their thinking.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“NGOs have different policies, procedures and opinions. Many staff don’t stay long enough to understand the local situation and hand offs are not being done very carefully. There is a lack of time for NGO workers to get to know the local people.”

*Karen female CBO leader*

“The NGO should understand the community needs first, learn ahead, see what is appropriate.”

*Karen female teacher*

“NGOs should understand the community well and adapt to the situation of the community. NGOs should empower the community to improve itself. Some NGOs make their own projects in the camps. But because they don’t know the community well it makes it difficult for the CBOs. We work for the community so we know the needs and want to communicate this.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“Before NGOs work in the refugee camp they have to investigate, do a deep needs assessment, be there for 2-3 months...”

*Karen Buddhist male Camp Committee member*

“NGOs want the teachers to teach in English and ask them to stay after school. They don’t realize the teachers can’t take extra time. They have to go home and look after the children, cook. It takes time to cook, build the fire, look for the vegetables. Things are not ready here like in the city for you (foreigners). We have no ready food. They don’t think about this and try to get the community to act like people who live in developed countries.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“NGOs come from another country, they want to treat our children as in their country, but the places are very different... The NGOs must learn the culture and situation first and evaluate if they must do something (like this) or not.”

*Karen male elder and education leader*

“There needs to be more dialogue between technical persons and local community persons so that technical persons can address real needs... You need long-term commitment to address real needs of the community... NGO staff change, so they don’t know the culture, history of a country... NGOs should have a community consultation team. They could be advisors on the level of knowledge in the community, and on cultural appropriateness.”

*Karen female CBO leader*

## **B. Clashes in Values and Culture around NGO Programming**

Following are several examples where outside NGOs’ projects or the values promoted by them upset camp residents and leaders. If it was not the project itself that was problematic, it was the way in which it was carried out. For instance, many refugees agreed that it is important to teach how to prevent HIV and AIDS. However, they did not agree on the methods outsiders were using to teach these subjects to their children.

### **Regarding Formal Education**

“You can’t change a society in the middle. You have to start with the basics in the beginning...NGOs should take this time to work with teachers and not push them. It takes time to improve English, to take lessons... It takes time to learn the Western training style--to change the old way to the new way. You cannot push people to do this quickly. People will be unhappy. You must do it slowly so they can understand it and develop a new idea and concept... The teaching methods at school are good for children to use critical thinking... It’s difficult to do it in the Western way with children with lots of activities. We don’t have the space, but we agree with Western teaching styles.”

*Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“When NGOs are more involved it ends the ‘banking system’ of knowledge – where you must accept only what the teachers use and can’t challenge teachers. A system with no critical thinking... The negative side is that most education systems are from the West. We can’t scold

our children, not even with a small stick... So the students don't respect the teachers, now the children are more disobedient...Both systems have a negative impact... The NGOs should consider that we feel there is a negative impact or the situation will get worse."

*Karen male Bible school teacher*

### **Regarding Child Rights**

"Sometimes you see a parent treat children in the traditional ancient way. Some is good, some is not. You can't go to the mother with five children and tell her how she should treat her children...She will say, 'you don't know about my children, I'm the mother, don't tell me what to do'... Introduce the new ideas to the young people, young parents."

*Karen Women's Organization leader*

"Because of children's rights teachings, parents stop berating their children. Now we stop beating children in school. If we do it effectively, it's good, but too much rights and no responsibility is not good. Now some children become very naughty... In other countries where they respect human rights they can go to courts to get punished, but in the camps that is not so. Elders don't agree with some of the points in the training for parents."

*Two young Karen women*

"Before we feel students are clever, obedient. Now there are too many rights and NGOs don't teach responsibilities. It's too much, too far, too quick – the teaching of rights... Now the children don't listen to us. Before, they listen... They know how to listen to their elders, obey their teachers, how to treat them with respect. Now they know about their rights and don't listen."

*Karen male elder and education leader*

"You see some things as child abuse, but to us it's our culture. Since we are a child, our parents teach us to help them. They also hit us with small sticks; the (NGOs) say it is child abuse. Their definition is not like our definition...I saw one child that had to carry charcoals one time a month; the father is gone and the mother has a new baby... What do you do if the child is not allowed to carry the charcoal? Who will do it? The child rests every two minutes when carrying the charcoal. I don't think it's child abuse. It's not trafficking, or doing a wrong thing to a child, like denying them school, or working every day, or beating him for no reason."

*Karen women's leader*

### **Regarding HIV/AIDS, Sex Education and Gender Awareness**

"When they introduce sex and HIV education, parents tell the camp leader to forbid those people to come and teach this...The Karen Community doesn't know much about sex issues – there are few publications in Karen or Burmese...When NGOs teach teenagers about sex, church leaders and parents feel they are teaching children how to have sex, how to use condoms. In our culture, this is confidential, secret...NGOs could approach the community and ask them how they want to introduce these ideas and what words we should use, what the limits are... Maybe we need to

have a survey on youth who have sex so we can help parents to see that it's not because of sex education, and that it is necessary.”

*Karen women's leader*

“[A family planning NGO] gives awareness about women's health. People are not clear about the awareness they give and people get it in the wrong way. For family planning they give awareness about condoms. Some young people want to try something they have never done – like sex. They try condoms and then don't like them and then don't use them. So then they are using it the wrong way... Now they get pregnant, and cannot finish school or they can get STDs like HIV/AIDS... NGOs should be specific, give them full-length workshop just on one topic. Then another topic.”

*Karen teenage woman*

“The NGOs teach many things: relationships, condom use, child spacing. This is a negative impact – to hear about this when they are young people - they want to experience it, this is bad... They should teach in a different way than condom use. Teach in the Christian method – to avoid relationships before marriage... now STDs are increasing.”

*Karen male Bible school teacher*

“Men don't have any opportunity; only women and children... Gender Based Violence (GBV) tells men what to do. You must give education carefully, and fully. If you only do half you will have problems – it is done the wrong way.”

*Karen male Camp Committee members*

### ***Reflections of the Listening Team***

Team members commented that NGO staff need to meet with different people, learn the camp situation, and understand what the people really need, rather than decide by themselves. Team members also acknowledged that there needed to be an exchange of information about context and that they were open to learning about the ways of outsiders in order to work well together. One Team member said: “We also need to get some idea about what is right and wrong because we don't know about the ideas outside the camp, we stay only here and have little exposure.”

Team members noted that many of these problems could be solved if the community were approached as a whole to share their ideas about how aid interventions should happen. A committee of stakeholders, including elders and young people, could be approached to assist the NGOs in developing appropriate interventions to increase community ownership and minimize a sense that outside ideas were being imposed on people. Such a stakeholder committee could also have suggested the best process and timeline for making such projects acceptable to the community.

## **V. Negative Impacts of Long-Term Assistance on Traditional Social Values**

Camp leaders and residents noted how camp life had impacted the traditional ways that refugees lived, thought about and experienced their lives after years of receiving aid. For some, the loss of altruism and community spirit was deeply upsetting, fearing that values had changed irreversibly

as responsibilities for community problems were taken over by NGOs. Others noted an increase in materialism as NGOs showcased their wealth, and outside influences introduced refugees to items they now desired and were no longer happy to live without. Finally, some commented that ongoing aid, particularly free food and supplies, had created dependency and promoted a lack of personal responsibility to care for and plan for one's life and future. Refugees feared that a lot of aid is given freely but may stop suddenly, leaving people ill-equipped to return home and live independently when little effort has been made to maintain a sense of personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and independence.

### **A. Undermining Altruism and Community Support Systems**

“In the camps, the altruistic spirit is lost – people think ‘we don’t have to worry, [the NGO] will take care of the sick people.’ The whole community used to talk to each other when one family had malaria – everyone watched out for them. If a boar was killed, it was shared with everyone. There was a sense of responsibility to each other.”

*Karen male leader*

“In the past people volunteered, now they want to get paid and don’t volunteer. NGOs pay to show power and people have no job and need a job. Less people want to develop their community. This is a big problem that we are facing.”

*Local Karen Women’s Organization leader*

### **B. Promoting Materialism**

“NGOs come in with all the paraphernalia – brand new trucks, toys, this had created a ‘give me give me’ spirit. Refugees see that and want it. CD players, walkmans, it created a situation where they are no longer satisfied with what they had. If I had a machete and enough salt, I thought I was doing well. Now I am no longer happy with what I have... ‘I don’t have anything but I want to give you’ - this was the attitude before. Now the attitude is ‘give me.’ Now things are more materialistic. Aid workers and agencies are not sensitive to the local economy. They rate everything on their economy. They pay someone way higher than the local economy creating a huge inflation. When they leave, it’s difficult to bring the inflation down. For example, the NGO will come in and pay 100Bt for a chicken, something local people can’t match. Now when the NGO leave, people cannot afford to buy chicken. It used to cost 20 Baht.”

*Karen male leader*

### **C. Creating Dependency**

“It’s unavoidable that humanitarian aid created a situation where we are programmed to receive. If aid wasn’t just given, but if there was a program that was much more of a give and take, it would be more beneficial for the whole community... There should be a system where they do something for their work; where how much you get depends on how much you work... It’s important not to get things for free so that people are not programmed to get aid. If you give it for free, you take away the sense of responsibility they had, i.e. they don’t think about how many kids to have because they are paid for with aid... In Burma/Myanmar, a woman only marries when she is ready to take care of a household, when she can cook, weave, rear the livestock, and

tend the field – same for the men. When you don't have to worry about food and shelter in the camps, they want sex, they have sex, and know outside assistance will take care of it. The sense of responsibility is lost in the camps.”

*Karen male leader*

“People here are very lucky. They are fed by *golawahs* (white people). The white people give them everything, they need not worry about anything... We work very hard in Burma/Myanmar and can't get enough. Being in the camp long term is not good. It has already been a generation. The people have only assistance for survival. If we have to go back to Burma/Myanmar tomorrow, the parents are old and won't work. The children don't know how to plant their rice; how can they survive? I understand they don't have land, but need agriculture training because they have to do this straight away when they go back... Everyone cannot be a teacher or a student. Some people need to know how to farm, to build houses. One day they will have to do that...”

*Karen female staff of local NGO*

“The whole idea of helping people should be a long-term vs. short-term program. Help now, but prepare to go back to a functioning economy. Don't take them from a war zone, program them to receive and expect to release them into a functioning economy. They won't revert to where they were. Even when NGOs are beginning to help people, they should already be planning for the refugee's reintegration into society.”

*Karen male leader*

“Children expect to get things for free, like school supplies. This affects their values. In Karen state, if they need something, they have to buy it so they value it. But here they get it for free... People in the camp get many things for free and in the long term this affects us for the future... The situation in the camps is not how it will be in the village later.”

*Karen female school teacher*

“When they come, they pay for everything. Then they leave suddenly before the community is ready. There is not enough capacity building before they leave. For example, they start a special education program and then they leave. People can't take it over, they need funding.”

*Karen female teacher*

“Before the camp, people had skills, now they come to the camp, they lose them.”

*Two young Karen men working in the camp*

“There is more drug use among the teenagers in the camps; they inhale burned plastic; they steal goods and girls' underwear. They get married early like 13 and 14. There is nothing to do in the camps; no planning for the future. They don't understand the consequences. They don't have to struggle for their life. They are born here and get everything. If they are educated they may go a different way than drugs and early marriage... Donors should set up work in the camps where it is safe. We need more than we get in food items so we need to earn money for that. Employing young people will keep them out of trouble... There are more alcohol users because people have nothing to do, especially men.”

*Middle-aged Karen woman living in the camp*

## ***Reflections of the Listening Team***

Upon reviewing the comments on the impacts of aid efforts on traditional values, one Karen leader added some cultural context by noting that, “western cultures are based on the individual in which we (the outsiders) strive for individual accomplishments and individual success. In Karen culture however, the community has a higher priority. There is individual ownership of farmland, homes, and personal property. However, the community turns out to farm, attending to one person's fields, followed by the next person's fields. Assisting each other in a cooperative way is very much the norm and to act otherwise would be considered selfish.”

On the issue of dependency, one Karen leader noted that some of the NGOs view the refugees as dependent victims as if they are on welfare to be fed the rest of their lives. “But in fact, many want to go to their homeland or go somewhere else to better their lives. Many feel like improving their lot and going back to Burma/Myanmar to be more independent. Karen are not willing to live on the dole for the rest of their lives.” She went on to explain that the Karen are taught to be proud and humble at the same time. When foreigners talk to Karen people, they might not understand that they are proud, but they should know that it is shameful for them to have to accept help; they would rather give than receive. That is why some of the elders have great concern that the second and third generations in the camps may have had to give up this pride in taking care of themselves and their needs through foreign aid. In keeping with her comments, a number of refugees told Listening Team members that what they wanted most was not more aid, but permission to travel outside the camps and to work without fear of arrest.

## **VI. Quality of Assistance and Information**

A number of people we spoke with raised concerns about the quality of assistance provided to refugees. These included concerns about the low quality of some trainings and programs, with an emphasis on poor medical care and vocational training programs that cannot support income generation. Refugees also expressed concern over the lack of information on issues ranging from the purpose of NGOs and international organizations' work, the lack of information in appropriate languages, the lack of refugee rights information, as well as the lack of objective information about the third country resettlement currently taking place.

### **A. Perceptions of the Quality of Programming and NGO Staff**

“Sometimes NGOs try to give training for one or two days and there is no follow-up, no evaluation. They don't come again to see what is happening. The camp people see that it does not benefit the people.”

*Local Karen Women's Organization leader*

“They just come and do the work, but have no real commitment. They don't really care. They do their duty. NGOs, including all who work for NGOs and the Karen staff too. When they get salary and trust from NGOs, they get power and shout at the patients and talk to them badly.”

*Male and female Karen refugees in their 20s and 30s*

“NGO staff do not have time to share feelings or care, they just do their job. This is because what seems to matter more (in programming) are the numbers, the percentages, the "indicators" in a quantitative way, but not often are the NGO staff able to learn about the local people's culture, traditions, customs, world perspectives, characteristics, that is, the qualitative side of life. Research and surveys are also often done for numbers and statistics, not for contexts and identities.”

*Karen female CBO leader*

“People feel like the NGO comes to make money for themselves and their project, and then they leave.”

*Karen female school teacher*

“[The international organization] did not try to monitor their work well. They don't evaluate things. They should monitor and evaluate.”

*Young Buddhist Karen woman working in beauty parlor in the camp*

“The (Karen) staff of the NGO want to finish their duty, even if it's not good. There is no evaluation, no improvement... They misuse the information that they give. The trainers are Karen and don't understand well what the outsiders teach (Thai or foreigners). They don't care and then they don't clarify. Some Karen just take the job for money... NGOs should be sure that the awareness they give is the right way for people to understand clearly. They (NGOs) only give a basic one-day training and then stop. There is no follow up to the basic education.”

*Teenage Karen woman*

## **Vocational Training**

“There have been so many vocational training projects. If you train people in vocational training and they have no way to use it, it's very frustrating... no one helps them access markets. There is no follow through... Some NGOs do loans, [but] in refugee camps loans don't work. People move, come and go, don't trust each other and have no collateral. There are so many needs and paying back loans to rich NGOs is second to helping a sick person... How many times do we have to make candles or soap before we realize it's not sustainable... If you are going to have a sewing training, make sure women have access to capital or a sewing center where they can use their skills. If a small refugee women's groups can manage to sell their items (like KWO), international NGOs should have much more access. There should be more small business training on how to do business plans, share responsibilities, skills and make cooperatives.”

*Foreign aid worker working with local CBOs*

“I took a cooking class but had no capital to start a business... Individual credit would not help because there is not a lot of demand for cakes. People are poor so they can't buy cakes. It's not a good business. If we make, the family will eat it... It would be better to do this project with a group of women; then you need good leadership to succeed and trainings on how to organize, work in teams, do budgets. We need a whole system to be responsible for sales... We are told we do this to help us with resettlement... Doing baking won't help in Burma/Myanmar because: 1) there are not facilities there – especially not the fancy ones they are using here now; 2) there is

no investment, which we need to beat the competition; 3) no steady electric supply in Burma/Myanmar... A Kao Soy shop (noodles) would be more helpful.”

*Woman living in the camp in her 40s*

## **Medical Care**

“Before, the doctors would give treatment and if they could not treat the problem they would send you to the hospital. Now they keep you in the camp. Sometimes the patients die before reaching the hospital. This happens many times in Mae La and Umpiem Camps. Compared to three years ago, they don’t care about the refugee health much now.”

*Buddhist Karen woman, 20s beauty parlor worker*

“We organized to send my uncle with our own money but by the time he got to the hospital it was too late. (He died.) The NGO says nothing because they say they have no budget for that.”

*Karen woman working with local CBO*

“One doctor prescribed strong medicine and the patient died; another died because the medicine was too weak... The budget keeps reducing. The staff salary increases, but the people suffer, and medicines and attention decreases.”

*Male and female Karen working in CBOs*

As a result of the poor quality of the medical care in the camps, some refugees felt that “respect for the Karen is becoming weaker and weaker.” Others felt like NGOs wanted to “eliminate the camps so the people don’t want to live there anymore.”

## **B. Information Sharing and Empowerment**

“Some foreigners come and we don’t know who they are and they come and ask for information and take pictures. This person comes and takes all this information and we are not clear what it is for. It is not appropriate. We don’t know how the information will be used... We worry how the information will be used. We want to be informed ahead of time.”

*Local Karen Women’s Organization leader*

“NGOs should communicate to villagers [in the internally displaced persons (IDP) areas of Burma/Myanmar] why aid increases and decreases; what the barriers for public health are, for proper monitoring... NGOs should tell villagers how the Burmese Government’s policy limits this work... The IDP community gets services, medicine, but don’t know the project, goal, the result; Did HIV decrease and by how much? We are not really empowering them...NGOs don’t disseminate information, share work plans or indicators. The NGOs know, but the community does not know.”

*Karen female CBO leader*

“[The UN-issued] identity cards are in Thai and English, so people don’t understand it and don’t know the rules.

*Muslim woman selling snacks in the market*

“The UN and NGOs put the information on the notice board, but the translation is not good, so we don’t understand.”

*Karen male camp leader*

“We were all asked to sign a paper saying we would voluntarily return to Burma/Myanmar. It was written in Thai, so none of the refugees knew what it said; they thought they were signing a paper to be registered for resettlement.”

*Young Karen refugee (who reads Thai)*

“Few people know that UNHCR is supposed to protect refugees.”

*Karen staff working for CBOs*

“People don’t know that being forced over the border is breaking international law.”

*Karen Buddhist woman, new arrival*

“NGOs give one side of information about resettlement and it’s not a balanced view, so people make the wrong decision. We want the NGOs working on resettlement to provide a balanced view.”

*Karen Buddhist male and camp leader*

“My dad requested to go to a third country. He had to do x-rays every month and to get more money for the Thai hospital. He has been having x-rays for one year. No one explains what we are going to the hospital for.”

*Karen male new arrival to refugee camp*

“There should be a special CBO group that monitors NGOs because we don’t know exactly what they do. They make complications in the camps and in the end the Camp Committee is responsible (for cleaning it up).”

*Karen Buddhist male and Camp Committee member*

### ***Reflections of the Listening Team***

One Karen leader of a CBO noted that even among the CBOs there still needs to be more discussion on how to operationalize information sharing. Although people believe it is a high priority to disseminate information gained both by CBOs and NGOs to the community, they said “we have yet to figure out how to do this with our own organizational knowledge, much less have a common sharing plan with other CBOs and NGOs.”

## **VII. Impact of Power Imbalances**

The concept of *annade* (Burmese Language) or *greng jai* (Thai language) is a deeply-rooted cultural norm. It defines a person’s sense of responsibility and obligation not to impose on or trouble another person. This also links to cultural norms on restrictions on saying no, rejecting help, or criticizing actions by persons of higher status because these responses are considered disrespectful. In particular, there is concern about appearing ungrateful for aid, to which refugees generally do not feel entitled. These cultural concepts affect the dynamics between aid workers

and recipients of aid because, from what camp residents told us, they are often not fully understood by outsiders. This gap has contributed to refugees either agreeing to projects and interventions that they did not want - or felt were harmful - or not complaining about problems resulting from outsider (NGO or UN) intervention (or lack of intervention). People in the camps also told the Listening Teams that living in the refugee camps and being totally dependent on foreign aid, they felt much more pressure to comply with the desires of outside NGOs than if they lived on their own territory and were self-sufficient.

### **A. Accountability and Powerlessness to Complain**

Trapped in a camp and totally dependent on outside aid, refugees feel they cannot afford to voice complaints and therefore risk reductions in aid or retribution from NGOs, their staff, or Thai authorities. There was a sense that if they were on their own territory and therefore less dependent on aid, they would be more willing to speak out.

“If Karen were in their own country they might stand up for themselves more... If outsiders understood the factors at play: They are not on their own territory and feel pressure from Thais to do as they say. They have no control, hardly any. It’s not just the cultural issues; it’s the whole environment they are in, the circumstances. In their home country they would stand up for themselves more.”

*Karen male leader*

“It’s only recently that Karen have recognized that we can stand up against NGOs, and that there have been demonstrations against medical organizations like [2 NGOs]. In the camps, people are still dependent on aid, so they are afraid if they do this their aid will be cut off. But inside Burma/Myanmar, they want to be independent so they are more likely to overcome the cultural barriers of standing up against the NGOs.”

*International male head of local NGO*

“Now they understand the community better because they have been here long enough to understand. Before, they think what they do is acceptable. Later, Karens speak up more. NGOs understand we are *annade*... It takes us two decades to be more outspoken. We see the nature of the foreigner and are used to it... Even our leaders, they think *golawah* (white person) is like Jesus Christ.”

*Karen male education leader*

“We cannot complain. We are illegal. Refugees are not free people. They stay in the camp, almost like a prison. People are afraid they won’t have rice anymore if they complain. We dare not speak out. We have no citizenship so we have no rights. Karens don’t want to argue with someone who helps you or has been a good person. They give you food so you have to repay them.”

*Karen woman working for local CBO*

“The NGOs control things. If they want you to do this, you have to do it. We can’t refuse their suggestion. Like we take power from them, or challenge them. We must stay quiet and do. We

are afraid they will cut off their aid... I don't want to discuss this. It's an old story for them, they don't care."

*Karen male elder and education leader*

"One refugee was stabbed in the eye by Thai authorities and lost his eye because he had left the camp... When that man was in the hospital the one who hurt him ran away. But the camp commander asked the man in the hospital not to report it to the UN. (He said) even if you report, they cannot help you. If you report it, all of you people will be sent back to Burma/Myanmar."

*Karen school teacher*

"Sometimes people did not get aid equally – for some it's not a problem but for others they complain in the community. It causes problems between the ones who get and don't get. They only complain in the community, not to the outsider. They don't feel good about this situation."

*Karen female school teacher*

## **B. Agreement to Externally Driven Initiatives**

One example of the impact of perceived power imbalances is agreement of refugees to externally driven ideas and projects. This was noted in an earlier section entitled "Imposition of Outside Values and Priorities." Refugees felt that concepts such as sex education, women's empowerment, and child-rearing methodologies were being imposed on them. In some instances, refugees fought this by asking camp leaders and women's representatives to negotiate different terms with the NGOs or by simply boycotting trainings and events that they felt were in contrast to their values. On some occasions however, refugees have complied with outside values and projects even though they did not agree with them or, worse, felt they put them in danger.

An example of this was with an NGO that had the idea to build public toilets in the refugee camp. Despite the fact that no one wanted the toilets except the NGO, a consultative process ensued, committees were formed and the toilets were built. No one uses them. Camp Committee members agreed to comply with the NGO project and when asked why, they said, "The NGO is very eager and willing and so we feel *g reng jai*. We must do with the plan of the NGO."

A member of the Camp Committee added, "They decide to do this and talk to the people but the people have no idea and they agree. Many are new arrivals and they don't understand about this. Inside Burma/Myanmar in some places they don't use toilets. The NGO asks for community volunteers and asks the Camp Committee to find volunteers to dig the hole. People don't want to volunteer. This makes it difficult for the Committee."

There were also serious concerns regarding the hiring of an ethnically Burman doctor from Burma/Myanmar to work with the Karen refugees, who feared he would view them as enemies of the Burmese Government. Refugees felt they could not trust someone who was sent to work with them with permission from the very government that had been persecuting them.

"We don't want him to come but we agreed because we worry about the long-term effect for us. If we are strong and say no, we worry the refugees won't have a doctor. Before we approved, we had a big meeting with everyone and we didn't want that doctor but we worry that if we say no,

what will happen for the future. We met a second time and agreed. We wrote a letter to say we don't want him, but they ignore it and we feel we have to say yes. Karens don't want to argue with someone who helps you or has been a good person. They give you food so you have to repay them. Now we feel like if they want to kill everyone they can. They kill us with guns in the jungle now they will kill us with medicine.”

*Male and female Karen community members*

### ***Reflections of the Listening Team***

Listening Team members explained that they and the refugees in general felt that not complying with NGO desires could have significant consequences: “If we kick them out, who will come and help us later? We are refugees. It will take a long time.” There was a sense among refugees that NGOs and their staff would take revenge and punish people for complaining by cutting off services. These sentiments raise questions of whether and how aid agencies communicate complaint mechanisms to refugees and how much cross-cultural exchange and understanding occurs when someone does communicate a problem. The fact that refugees agreed to projects and initiatives that they knew were useless, wasted money, or worse, shows how strong concepts of *annade* are in Burmese culture. This in turn raises questions of the extent to which staff of foreign aid agencies understand the cultural traditions at play when communicating with refugees to gather data and plan projects and partnerships.

## **VIII. Advice to Funding Agencies**

A number of comments and suggestions were addressed specifically to donors. In the context of the refugee camps, a donor can be a funding agency based abroad, or more likely, an NGO based in Thailand that funds local partners such as camp-based CBOs. Comments ranged from asking for more monitoring and presence and advising how to prevent corruption, to asking for less selectivity and bureaucracy in giving and managing funding to CBOs. Finally, a number of refugees raised concerns over their safety, calling for better protection and presence by international agencies.

### **A. Improve Monitoring to Manage and Prevent Corruption**

A number of people wanted a stronger donor presence and more thorough monitoring of projects. For some refugees, involving donors was a way to communicate concerns to NGOs through a third party. A smaller number of refugees who had worked in Burma/Myanmar wanted donors to be more transparent about how funds were used by NGOs inside Burma/Myanmar and the extent to which the Burmese Government benefited from international funds.

“It's better if the donor comes to the camp and monitors at the beginning, middle, and end.”

*Karen male Pastor*

“NGOs and the UN should go and investigate if things are being done correctly. If the local people make it wrong they should stop them in their work... NGOs need to find out the corruption and review their job and their organization.”

*Middle-aged woman attending non-formal education classes*

“Donors need to come and monitor by themselves, not only have the NGOs do it. Between the donors and refugees are the NGOs.”

*Representative of the Karen Women’s Organization*

“Donors should come back and evaluate and monitor the projects after they give the money.”

*Young Karen woman working in CBOs*

“I want the NGOs and donors to come and see for themselves how the situation is – to monitor. The donors should evaluate the healthcare system.”

*Karen Buddhist male teacher*

“Donors did the worst thing to the people (in Burma/Myanmar). They give money and then don’t monitor it. The money is for the benefit of the army, not the people. They should monitor but they can’t because the SPDC [Burmese Government] won’t allow it. I think 70% of aid goes to the SPDC, but you can monitor only 30%. You can say bye to the other 70%... You bring medicine but there are lots of guns to kill the people. What is the point of that? People won’t ever get free medicines.”

*Karen male refugee who used to work with an aid agency inside Burma/Myanmar*

“Donors need to be transparent and accountable about working with the Burmese Government and tell the people too to be accountable to them. Donors working with SPDC (Burmese Government) need to know the impact of their program.”

*Karen male recent arrival to the refugee camps*

## **B. Simplify Donor Procedures and Demands**

Both international aid workers and refugees working in CBOs raised concerns about demands donors place on them in terms of time, reporting, meetings, and documentation. International staff were concerned that donor demands for facts and figures undermined time to interact with refugees to build relationships and establish trust and true partnerships. By forcing staff to spend time on the quantitative rather than qualitative aspects of program implementation, donors undermine the process of establishing culturally appropriate and relevant interventions and meaningful partnerships. As a result, projects can be poorly planned or limit buy-in from the refugee community. Refugees themselves complained that there was not enough dialogue before a project was planned and implemented and that overall time frames for project implementation were too restrictive.

“Donors demand task-focused work. Staff would love to have more time to talk to people in the camp, to spend the night in the camp (which is not allowed). But we have reports due, with facts, and numbers, and it needs to be right to keep the funding coming... Some NGOs are run like businesses. These are people we are talking about. People come first, it’s not just numbers, and money... The donors are not helping us be respectful because they come with their new ideas, trends and we have to jump... We end up with ridiculous timeframes to do things. Donors don’t get it. If they say three months, it must be so – but it would take longer to do this with the right process. We cut out the process and spend the rest of the year doing damage control.”

*Long-time foreign aid worker on the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border*

“At first the donors give us (Karen CBOs in the camp) the money to do our work (on our own); then the NGOs come and it’s very complicated. We have to do for them according to their regulations that are not clear. They use formal words of English and they give us a short time to implement the project and we have to report to them directly.”

*Man working in an outside-funded initiative that changed from being Karen-led, to being foreign-led.*

“[An international organization] wants receipts from sellers in the market with house numbers and refugee numbers – for a few cucumbers. We don’t understand why they want that. We work with many other donors already. We don’t have only one project – we have more than 20...How can we give them monthly receipts, we don’t have time for that. [The international organization] wants very detailed receipts. We are busy – the nursery school and safe house, we have to teach children, look after them, do trainings...We have a lot of donors who visit us. If they don’t understand, they ask and we discuss. We encourage them to come and look and see...There is too much talking and planning to start a five-month project. Then they don’t send us the money, but want the report.”

*Representative of the Karen Women’s Organization*

“So much time, so many meetings, I am afraid of that... It’s hard to speak English, it’s not our language. Sometimes we don’t understand what they are saying. Sometimes I really feel tired to go to these (NGO/donor) meetings in English. I want to require the donors to have a translator.”

*Representative of the Karen Women’s Organization*

### **C. Improve Protection**

The call for more on-the-ground presence of donors and international agencies was also asked of UN agencies mandated to protect refugees from abuse in the camps and forcible return. Many refugees expressed concern over their safety.

“Sometimes I would like UNHCR to come and check on security in the camp. Sometimes we are afraid of the Thai commanders because they have weapons.”

*Female school teacher*

“If the UN does not know what is happening they will be weaker. [They] have to work for the people, to protect the people. If they don’t protect the people what are they doing here for the refugees? The UN is there with a big office and a lot of staff, but they should be more involved with the people. They should talk to the people, visit the people and be very close to the people. This way the people know who is protecting them. Now the people don’t know. So what is the point that there is a UN?”

*Karen woman working with local CBO*

“The Thai authorities come into the camp and try to catch new arrivals who have no ID. So I sleep in the toilet to hide. They came in four months ago around four in the morning. In Burma/Myanmar, we are afraid of the government and we are afraid in the camps. They sent back over 20 people – some say 300-400 to the IDP camp... I want to urge the UN to register the new arrivals quickly. The Thais are friends with the Burmese so I want the UN to be in charge of

the camps. Thailand and Burma/Myanmar can do any bribes, which can affect the UN and NGOs working in the camps.”

*New arrival to refugee camps*

## **IX. Perceptions from Villagers near Refugee Camps**

Villagers living near the refugee camps showed profound understanding and compassion for the refugees. They were grateful to NGOs for helping the refugees, even though they themselves did not get the same assistance from the NGOs. Repeatedly, villagers showed empathy and understanding, noting that refugees had fled fighting and human rights abuses. Many recognized that services in the camp were far superior to those in the nearby villages, but they voiced no jealousy regarding the absence of aid to villages. Some did feel that getting aid to villages was important because villagers were poor. Others noted resentment regarding the behavior of some refugees who came to the villages drunk or to take natural jungle resources for sale. Of the few ethnic Thai people we found in the villages – usually shop keepers - we also heard compassion and understanding towards the refugees. One Thai woman emphasized how good the Karen people are, and how in the end, we are all humans and deserve respect.

### **A. Shared Ethnicity and History Between Refugees and Village Residents**

Villagers we spoke with were themselves of Karen origin, and upon further probing a few admitted that they were themselves originally from Burma/Myanmar. As one villager stated, “we are all Karen.” The border line dividing Thai-Karen from Burmese-Karen is seen as arbitrary. Other villagers explained that their grandparents were from that side of the border. The common ethnic identity between villagers and refugees resulted in support, rather than jealousies, towards refugees.

“Normally village leaders are upset with refugees. They steal things and wood, and make the water dirty. (But) we feel we are Karen first, Thai or Burmese second. They understand the situation of refugees from Burma/Myanmar. The villagers had relatives in Burma/Myanmar before the camp.”

*Thai-Karen male leader of NGO working to support villages near refugee camps*

“In the past, the grandmothers and fathers of this village were from the other side. They stayed there until the situation was too bad, then went to the camp. So we have relatives in the camps. A few come back here. We are the same people – Karen. We feel they are our relatives. If people in the camp don’t get aid, they cannot stay. We understand they need support.”

*Two male Thai-Karen leaders of village near Mae La Refugee Camp*

### **B. Understanding and Empathy for Refugees**

“I am glad the NGOs help the refugees. I feel sorry for them... We must be kind to them. If we have to spend our life like them we are not sure we can do it... Before, the rice in the camp was not good, now it is better than what I sell in the shop... Their fish paste is better than ours too... There is no jealousy—only a little... The Thai police came here to arrest some of the people. Villagers say they are thieves. But who knows if they saw them or only accuse them. They are

good people, they come and buy things, they are normal...The NGOs help the refugees and the refugees supply us with labor. Here we have a village, we have everything, food, houses, we don't need NGO help... If the NGOs don't help the refugees, the Thai would not allow them to stay...I am glad they can go abroad and make money and send it home. I feel sorry for the people in the camp – the soldiers take their animals and money.”

*Female Thai shopkeeper living in village near a camp*

“The villagers understand that the refugees need help. Because we understand, we don't have any bad feelings, we have good feelings... We think that resettlement is a good option for them – because abroad they can work. In the camps they cannot work... We thank the NGOs for helping refugees. They fall down but the NGOs help them get back up...If the refugees go away that is good for them, but if they go back to Burma/Myanmar they will be afraid for their lives.”

*Thai-Karen man living in village near refugee camp*

“Over three years I see many things improve for the refugees' lives – especially schools. But outside the camp, they never get profit from the NGOs. The Thai Government asks that some assistance goes outside the camps.”

*Thai-Karen male leader of NGO working in villages near refugee camps*

### **C. Views Regarding Behavior of Refugees Towards Local Villagers**

There were some concerns about refugees coming to the jungle surrounding the villages to take bamboo, wild vegetables, and fruit. Generally villagers understood that refugees needed shelter and food beyond what was supplied by aid agencies in the camps. There were no hard feelings about refugees using what is considered “common” jungle land. However, villagers did want them to maintain the environment by not cutting the bamboo necessary to maintain the streams. Although villagers accepted refugees using the jungle resources for personal use, if bamboo or wild foods were harvested to sell for cash, they did not approve. There were also some concerns over people from the camp coming to steal items from the villagers, or young people drinking and coming to the village to pick fights.

“I am happy that there is aid for the refugees because they cannot stay in their country. In the village we can farm our products – it's enough... People from the camp come and pick vegetables in the jungles... They can also earn money or be laborers. People don't mind. They know the food in the camp is not enough. There are wild vegetables for everyone to eat. We know the situation in Burma/Myanmar and we are sympathetic... If the refugees get support it's good, if not it's bad.”

*Two male village leaders of Thai-Karen village near refugee camp*

“The only negative is that camp people go outside and cut the bamboo trees and wild bananas. This causes the stream to be dry... We tell them, ‘take it this time,’ but don't do it next time. It's difficult to control because a different one comes back... If they cut banana trees to eat that is ok, but if they cut it to feed the pig that is not ok. If they cut bamboo for themselves that is all right, if it is to sell, we are not so happy... If they cut 10 pieces a day the forest will be gone. If the

forest is gone there will be no stream. If they eat the wild vegetables themselves it is all right, but if they sell it, no.”

*Thai-Karen male village leaders living in a village near refugee camp*

#### **D. Positive Impacts of Refugee Camps on Nearby Villages**

Villagers noted some positive impacts as a result of the refugee camps. Villagers are able to use the clinic for free, and in some cases, are also able to send their children to the school for free. They benefit from the refugee camps by being able to use their market, which they state is superior to their own and more conveniently located. They are also able to sell vegetables in the market as a source of income.

“Here we have our first school – only non-formal education. Four girl students from this village go to study in Mae La Camp. Some commute, some stay with relatives, the education is free. Whoever wants to stay in the camp can go and study English... There are other benefits: For some religious ceremonies we go to the camp for offering from the temple. The monk comes here to ask for donation– we help each other. If villagers here don’t have enough rice, we can ask for it in the camp. We can buy rice there; there is a good market in the camp by the Muslims. It’s better than our market and closer. We use the clinics in the camp, especially the pregnant women and newborns. They know we are from the village – we pay only five Baht for a patient card.”

*Thai-Karen male village representative*

“We also get benefit from the camps because we have friends there, and can buy food. Many people from this village also use the schools and clinics in the camps for free. They help some people here. But aid from camps does not come here... We feel good that NGOs help the people there... Their lifestyle is good. They can speak English. They speak more languages than us.”

*Two women living in a Thai-Karen village who are originally from Burma/Myanmar*

“We go to the camp to visit friends, go to the hospital and go shopping... We go to the camp to sell vegetables, they come here for labor. We exchange, we help each other... If they go away, we will miss the source of labor. The Thais need them for labor too; every day they take trucks to the camp to pick up laborers. At harvest time we need 30 persons per day.”

*Thai-Karen man living in village near refugee camp*

“If there are no refugees how will we find the labor? There will be no one to farm. We will have to pay more. We pay them 100 Baht per day, Thais we have to pay more. If we don’t have the refugees, how will we manage? If there is more labor, there are more sales... People from here use the clinic at Mae La and study there too. They can eat there with their friends.”

*Thai female shopkeeper living in Thai-Karen village near camps*

#### **Reflections of the Listening Team**

In many of the world’s refugee situations, tensions between villagers and refugees are common as refugees’ standard of living is often higher than the host population. Refugees on the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border enjoy a higher standard of living than surrounding villages, with access to free medical care, education, as well as a full food basket. Nonetheless, in this case,

surrounding villagers were, for the most part, empathetic towards the refugees. Many understood the persecution they had fled and that refugees had limited freedom to live a normal life and work legally outside the camps, unless sponsored by Thais. They realized they had to depend on aid and also appreciated the direct benefits provided by NGOs in the camps who allowed nearby villagers to get free medical assistance and even some schooling. Ultimately the fact that most villagers the Listening Team spoke with were themselves of the same ethnic group limited tensions with the refugees.

For those who did not share the same ethnicity, the Listening Team was surprised to learn that these Thai people were also empathetic toward the refugees and appreciated the benefits of having the refugees as a source of cheap labor. Whereas Thais in far away cities did not reflect these views, it seems that those who had met and interacted with the refugees themselves were empathetic and did not speak of jealousies.