40 Years

Working Together With Displaced Communities On The Thai Myanmar Border

In presenting **“40 years – Working together with displaced communities on the Thai Myanmar border”** we reflect on four decades of The Border Consortium’s journey alongside the resilient communities on the Thai-Myanmar border. This publication, distilled from our reports over the years, is a testament to the strength and resolve of those we have had the privilege to support. It’s enriched by the insights of former TBC Executive Directors, Jack Dunford and Sally Thompson, as well as the invaluable perspectives of refugee and displaced leaders who have been integral to our narrative.

I am grateful to our dedicated staff and partners for their steadfast dedication, and to Act for Peace (Australia) for their funding support in bringing these accounts to the page. As we look back over 40 years, we see not despair, but a legacy of courage and hope that continues to guide our way forward.

Leon de Riedmatten
TBC Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

It has been forty years since the first refugee camps were established on the Thai side of the Thailand-Burma border for displaced people of southeastern Burma fleeing the offensives of the Burma Army. It has also been forty years that The Border Consortium (TBC), what was then called the Consortium of Christian Agencies, has been supporting these refugees, working together with the ethnic Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Shan refugee communities and their representatives to ensure that food, shelter, cooking fuel and other essentials are provided to those that need it most. Forty years of working together to strengthen refugee administration and governance. Forty years of hoping that the time will come for refugees to return safely and with dignity, to re-establish their lives in their homeland.

Since 1984, when the Royal Thai Government first asked relief agencies to provide temporary assistance to fleeing refugees, TBC has seen profound political, social and economic changes in Burma (or Myanmar as it has become more commonly known), in Thailand, and in the refugees' ethnic homelands in Burma across the border. Military coups, economic crashes, pandemics, the digital revolution, political upheaval and the waxing and waning of armed conflict has intersected with the lives of the refugees and the life of TBC. TBC and the refugee community have both had to adapt, to evolve and to grow together. Furthermore, despite forty years of hospitality, and the various changes of governing actors of Thailand, there has been no large-scale push back towards the refugee population. Despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Thailand, its governments, people and local communities, have largely shown patience, and a remarkable degree of hospitality towards the refugee populations. Furthermore, that the humanitarian needs of these camps have been met for four decades is also due to the generous support that various donors have provided, whether the mostly Christian focussed charities at the beginning, the individual donations from NGOs and individuals around the world, or the mostly government originated funding that became the dominant source of funding.

The camps on this border are unique among refugee contexts around the world. Unique in that they are refugee established, refugee-led, and refugee-run. TBC has, throughout the past forty years, worked to ensure that this remains, despite the immense difficulties and challenges that TBC, as the NGO consortium supporting the camps, as well as the refugee committees who represent the refugee community, have faced. It has not always been easy, there have been bumps in the road. Yet, the strong partnership that TBC has had with the refugee community remains today, built on mutual respect, equal partnership, and a firm commitment to making sure that refugees are provided for, their agency is respected, and that a semblance of life, livelihood and security is maintained. This report is not about celebrating the fact that these refugee camps have needed to exist for forty years. Rather, it is a commemoration and acknowledgement of the profound achievements of the refugee communities that TBC has been proud to support for so long.

[1] This report will use the current name, the Border Consortium (TBC), throughout for purposes of clarity despite the fact that for much of the consortium's existence, it has operated under different names – the Consortium of Christian Agencies (CCA), (1984-1991), the Burma Border Consortium (BBC) (1991-2004), the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) (2004-2012), and the Border Consortium (2012-present). A box explaining the name changes through the years can be found on page xx.

[2] To use Burma or Myanmar is not a neutral exercise. The military government the State Law and Order Restoration Council- 1989 officially changed the name of the country to Myanmar from Burma in 1989. However, many within and outside of Myanmar continued to use Burma as a statement of principle, believing that the military did not have the legitimacy to change the name without the people's consent. This report follows the trajectory of TBC's usage. Therefore it uses Burma where it was referred to in TBC reports of the past up to and including 2010, Burma/Myanmar when referencing reports from 2011 to 2018 and Myanmar in reference to reports from 2019. It uses Myanmar when referring to the country in a general sense without a reference to a particular time.

CHAPTER ONE :

THE FIRST DECADE 1984-1994

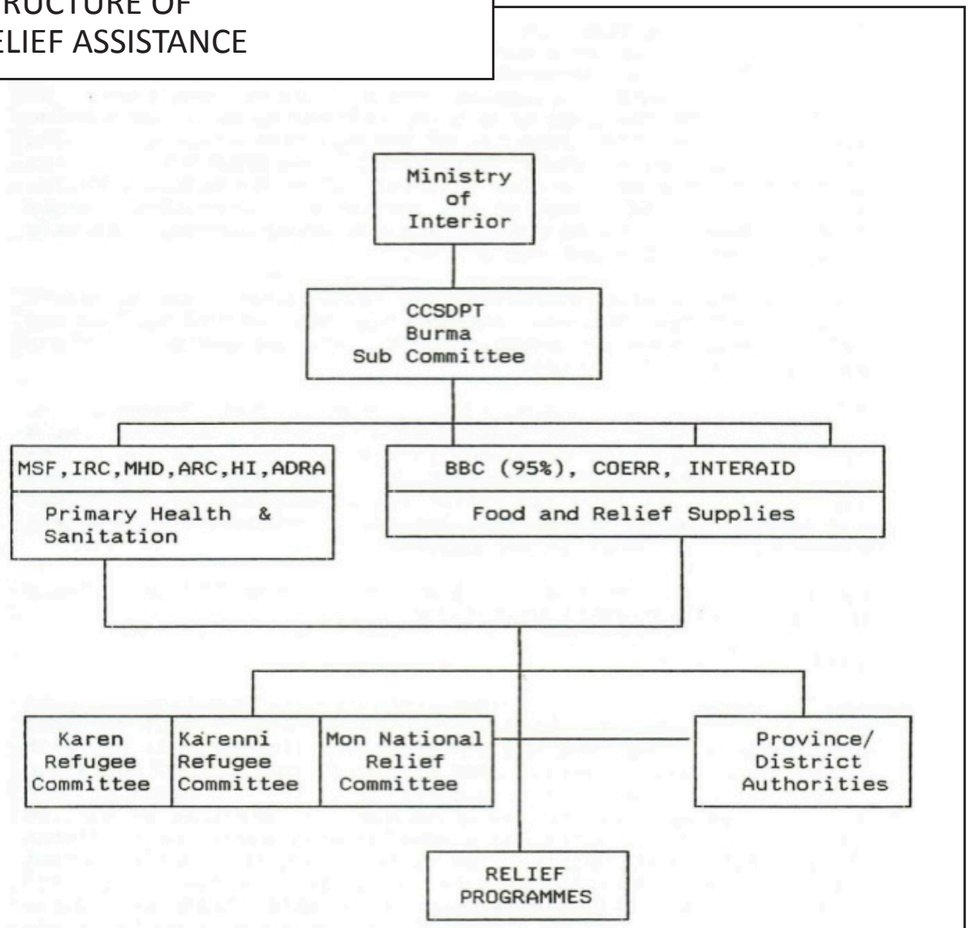
Mae La,1984

Establishing the Camps, Establishing the Consortium

The year 1984 is the starting point for the establishment of what was supposed to be temporary refugee camps in Thailand for ethnic Karen fleeing offensives by Burmese troops. It wasn't the first time that people fled over the Moei River that separates the two neighbouring countries to seek temporary sanctuary in Thailand. In fact, for several years, refugees would cross the border near Mae Sariang during the annual dry season offensive by the Burmese army around the Karen National Union headquarters near Manerplaw. Local Thai-Karen communities and missionary groups would provide temporary relief in this remote part of Thailand and the situation received little public attention. When the rains came, those who fled would return home to plough and plant their crops. But 1984 changed all that.

The military offensive in 1984 on the trading posts of the KNU along the Moei River opposite Tak province was more widespread, intense and sustained, and subsequently, the 9,000 Karen who fled was too much for local communities in Thailand to deal with. It was at this point that the Thai government, through the Ministry of Interior, requested voluntary agencies to provide emergency assistance. These voluntary agencies had been working in Thailand for several years already, dealing with the Indochinese refugees through the umbrella of the Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT). The seven agencies who decided to provide support to the Karen refugees pooled their financial resources and established a joint programme. Together, these agencies formed the Consortium of Christian Agencies (CCA), the original name of what is now The Border Consortium. The founding members were World Vision, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship, Thailand Baptist Mission, Committee to Aid for South East Asia (ZOA), Mennonite Central Committee, and Church of Christ in Thailand. There was established a sub-committee, the CCSDPT Karen sub-committee – the name of which was later changed to the Burma Sub Committee after Mon and Karenni refugees became part of the programme - in order to coordinate response. All agencies who wished to help were welcomed. The CCSDPT Sub Committee also included aid agencies that were providing other forms of assistance than the emergency relief that TBC provided such as health services.

STRUCTURE OF
RELIEF ASSISTANCE



ADRA - Adventist Development and Relief Agency
ARC - American Refugee Committee
BBC - Burmese Border Consortium
COERR - Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees
HI - Handicap International
INTERAID - Interaid International Thailand
IRC - International Rescue Committee
MHD - Malteser-Hilfsdienst Auslandsdienst E.V.
MSF - Medecins Sans Frontieres - France

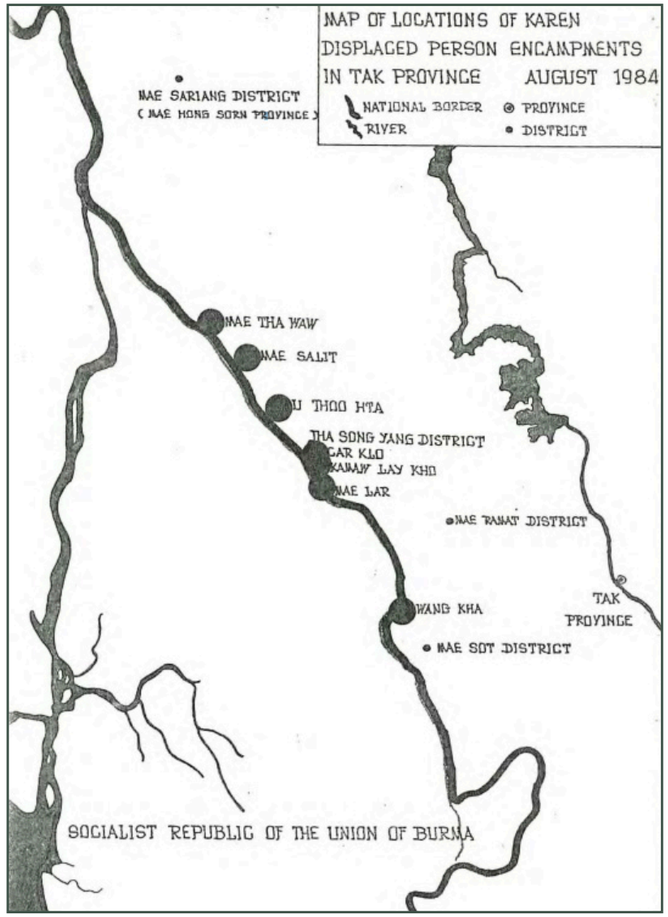
1994 structure of Relief

At the beginning, TBC's work was rather more simple than it is today. Principally, the consortium funded the provision of emergency relief in the form of rice, fishpaste, salt and chilli which was supplied to the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC). The KRC in turn would distribute the food and relief supplies to the refugees.[3] From the outset, TBC found the KRC to be highly organised, establishing the camps themselves. All camp activities such as cultural and educational needs were sustained by the refugees themselves. Furthermore, TBC did not provide all the refugees essential food needs, as a level of self-sufficiency existed, particularly in the early years. This is because the refugees had the ability to obtain seasonal work and go foraging in the local areas without having a large impact on local resources, with the camps initially existing as small, village-like communities.

General Reverend Robert Thwe, Chairperson of the Karen Refugee Committee : KRC was established a long time before the first refugee camps. It was in 1975 when the first refugees came over the border. It was established with the main purpose of being the bridge between the people who were fleeing and the Thai authorities. KRC were the ones trying to negotiate and communicate with the authorities and getting permission regarding where the refugees would temporarily stay. At that time, there were 2,000 refugees who crossed the border to the Thai side. During 1983, there were only around 300 people remaining in Thailand but after the conflict in 1984 there were 9,000 refugees on the Thai side. Thus, KRC had already established the camp committee before TBC came. When TBC came, they worked with KRC together and followed KRC's leadership.

Other essential relief items such as blankets, mosquito nets and cooking utensils were also provided. Medical assistance was provided initially by French health NGOs who also monitored for malnutrition. There were initially seven camps along the River Moei, with refugees building their homes out of bamboo and dried leaves foraged in the nearby forest.

[3]Burma Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, July-December 1994. Page 19.



Map Of Locations of Karen Displaced Person Encampments In Tak Province August 1984[4]

This 'temporary' situation remained, and over the years, as more sustained military offensives continued, more refugees starting arriving. In 1986, in a report by one of TBC's (then CCA) members, Church of Christ in Thailand who would produce annual reports on the border situation in the earlier years, reported rather prophetically that:

> Once again a short term emergency is turning into a long term problem and if no effective action is taken soon there can be little hope of a satisfactory solution within the foreseeable future.[5]

[4] Church of Christ in Thailand Annual Refugee Programme Report, 1984, Appendix C.

[5] Church of Christ in Thailand Annual Refugee Programme Report, 1986. Page 14.

Mass Demonstrations and Appetite for Change

In 1987, at which point the number of refugees had more than doubled to 20,000, the Burmese Government announced its intention to defeat the KNU and take all Karen territory within two years. Yet political events in 1988 in central Burma brought the world's attention to the democracy struggle. Spurred on by economic mismanagement and violent suppression of student demonstrations, a national uprising comprising of all sectors of society manifest in mass street demonstrations, a general strike, and calls for democracy. A violent crackdown, with thousands of protestors gunned down in the streets bloodily ensured that the overthrow of military rule was not going to happen. Students fled to the border areas, and ethnic Karen, Mon, and Karenni communities provided support to them. Some students made their way over the border to the camps, while some formed an armed group with support from the KNU. The students brought new cooperation and relations between ethnic groups and the ethnic Burman and also international attention to the Burmese situation.

New arrival Tha Song Yang

The Burma military meanwhile, staged a coup in September 1988, replacing the previous military-led government – the Burma Socialist Programme Party - with a new ruling clique, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). A subsequent national election was held in 1990 and despite SLROC intimidation of democratic forces, including the imprisonment of emergent democracy leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and previous Prime Minister, U Nu, the military lost heavily. Their party won

just ten seats while Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won an overwhelming majority, 80% of the seats. Unwilling to accept defeat, SLORC reneged on its promise to respect the outcome of the election, arrested at least 100 elected representatives, declared the necessity of drafting a new constitution before a transfer of power, and in 1992 established the National Convention for this purpose. This set the country into stasis politically for much of the next twenty years. General Than Shwe became the junta head in 1992, and SLORC changed its name in 1997 to the State Peace and Development Council. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Winner in 1991, remained under house arrest for much of this time, and the military's political position appeared set. This moment of hope in 1988 then, not just for the democracy protesters in Rangoon but also for ethnic nationalities such as the Karen and the Mon, was extinguished, and military rule was consolidated over the next few years via persecution of democracy actors, military offensives against ethnic groups, and the closing of meaningful space for political reform.

More offensives, more refugees

Amid the political developments in central Burma in 1988-1990 and the large-scale democracy movement outlined above, armed conflict and refugee flows continued in border areas. Dry season offensives in 1989 and 1990 resulted in more territory gained by the Burmese troops. In 1989, the Karenni Social Welfare Committee, (founded in 1987 and in 1997 changed its name to the Karenni Refugee Committee), approached CCA to request help for Karenni refugees who had fled into Mae Hong Son Province in northern Thailand and this was organised into an ongoing assistance programme by 1990.

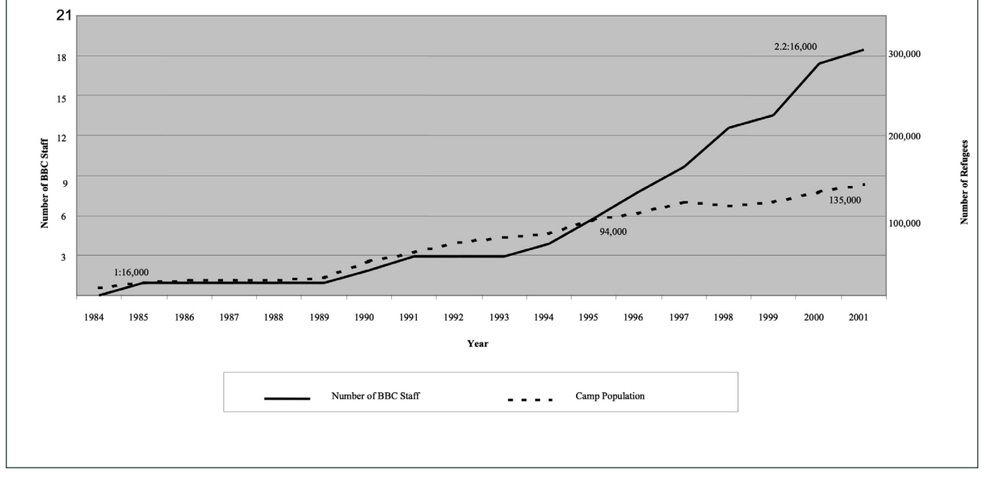
In early 1990, Mon and Karen refugees started to arrive in Kanchanaburi province and CCA responded to a request from the Mon National Relief Committee to deliver assistance. By 1990 the refugee population was 43,500 with 32,000 Karen, 8,500 Mon and 3,000 Karenni refugees. The expansion of the programme to more refugee camps, up to 28 by 1991, and working with the Karenni and Mon refugee representatives, was approved by Thailand's Ministry of Interior in 1991.

The MoI's guidelines issued in 1991 continued to reemphasise the minimal nature of TBC's presence and that assistance should be limited to essentials such as food, clothing and medicine. These guidelines by the Thai government fit well with BTBC's overriding philosophy and the capacity of the refugee committees. As put in 1992 by a TBC report:

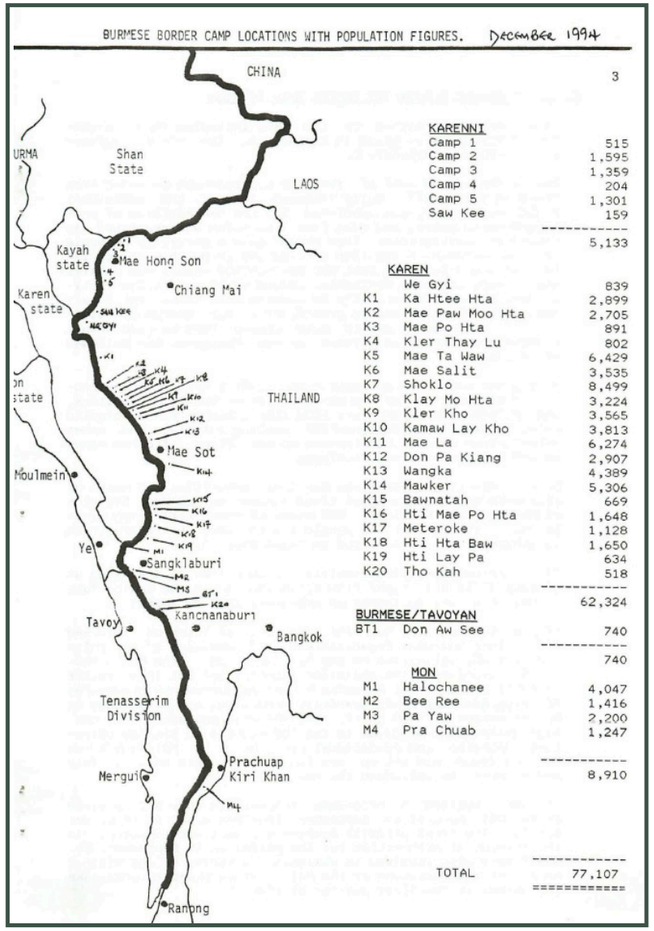
> The BBC concurs with this policy because the refugee communities are capable of running their own affairs. Minimising expatriate presence also reduces the aid-dependency observed in other refugee situations and helps to preserve the refugees' own culture and life-tyles, making eventual return to their homes less problematical.[6]

Crucially, over the next years, the Burmese military began to consolidate control over the whole border area while KNU presence in the Irrawaddy delta region was wiped out. Shifts in the political economy of the border aided this, as the KNU lost sources of income in terms of taxation at border checkpoints on Thailand-Burma trade, while logging concessions given to Thai companies provided revenue to the SLORC. Combined with a massive increase in Burmese military personnel, this shifting political economy weakened the position of ethnic non-state armed groups vis-à-vis an aggressive Burmese military. And while Ne Win's 1987 declaration that the Karen insurgency would be wiped out within two years, repeated by then-SLORC chief, Saw Maung in 1988, did not come to fruition, the following twenty years did see the gradual erosion of KNU-administered territory and control over most parts of the southeast. By the end of 1994, the population of refugees in the camps along the border had reached over 77,000 people.

Figure 3.1: Ratio of BBC Staff to Refugees



[6] Burma Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, January – June 1992. Page 7.



Camp Locations, 1994.[7]

Yet the simplicity of TBC's programme remained. Basically the members of the consortium pooled their resources and this went into one bank account held by one of its members – the Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship. TBMF would transfer these funds to the coordinator in Mae Sot or Kanchanaburi who would purchase supplies, monitor deliveries, negotiate permits with local Thai authorities, and assess needs with the local refugee committees. For such a big operation, working with tens of thousands of refugees, this was a tiny footprint in terms of staff, structure, and administration. Yet such a limited presence was only possible because of the organisation, capacity and trust of the refugee committees. Thus in the first ten years, the number of TBC staff remained tiny. But changes in the political context over the next few years had significant implications for camp organisation and the relief programme.

[7] Burma Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, 1994. Page 3.

Figure 3.2: BBC Staff Numbers, Refugee Caseload, and Number of Camps 1984-2003

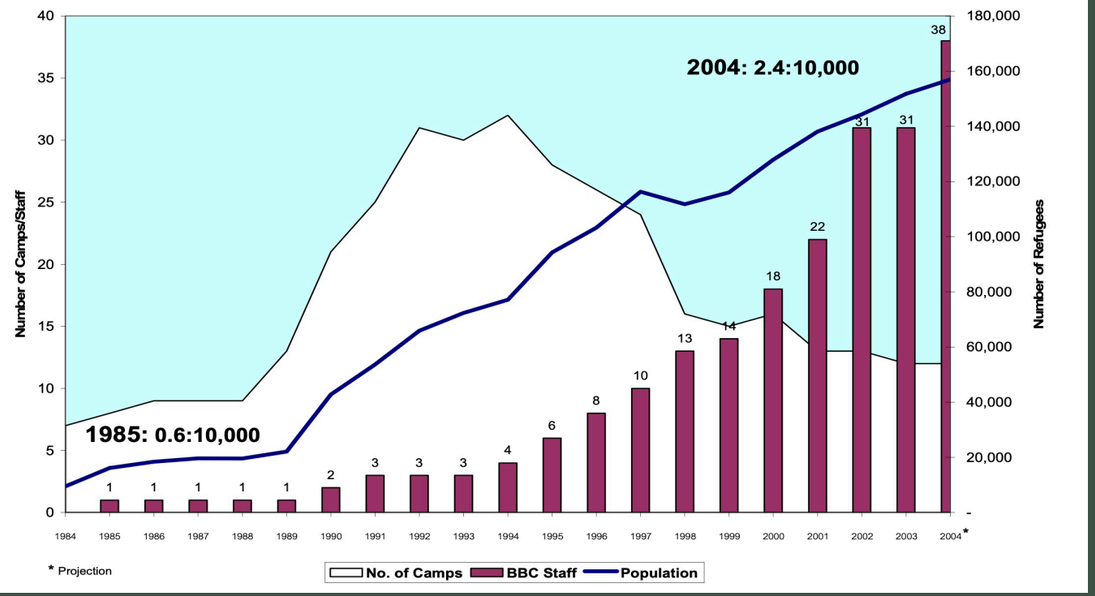
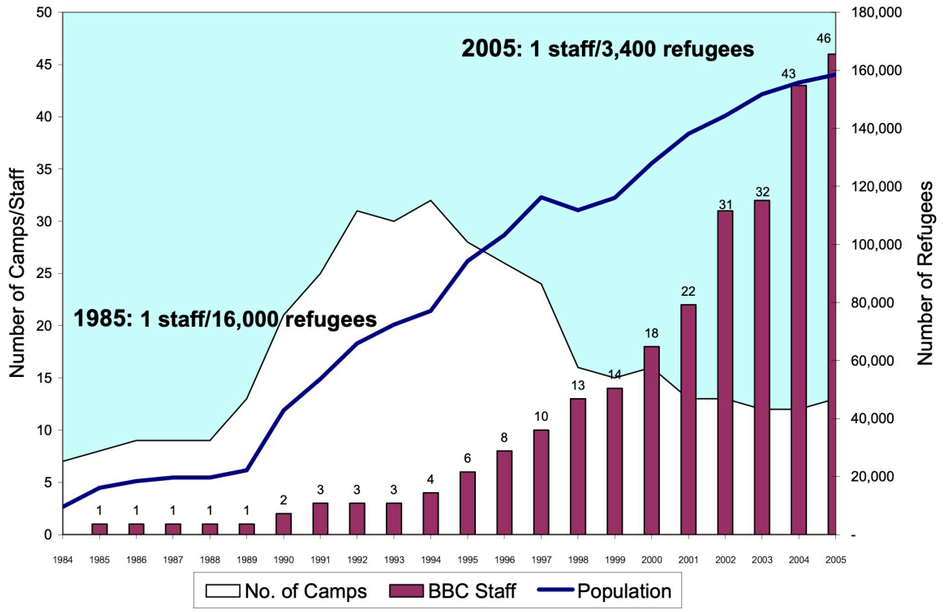


Figure 3.3: TBBC Staff Numbers, Refugee Caseload, and Number of Camps 1984-2005



Note: Figures for staff in 2003/4/5 readjusted to include support staff (drivers/office assistants) not previously recorded.

CHAPTER TWO :

The 1995 Fall of KNU Headquarters and Consolidation of Burmese military control of the border

The Fall of Manerplaw, SLORC consolidation of the border, and Incursions onto Thai Soil

While there were no dry season offensives in 1993 and 1994, refugee populations continued to increase, and new arrivals increasingly reported harassment, extortion and other human rights violations by SLORC troops, as well as mounting instances of forced labour, in particular related to the tens of thousands of people forcibly conscripted to work on the construction of the Ye-Tavoy railway line. Added to this, in 1994, Thai government's policy appeared to try and restrict new arrivals, with the KRC instructed not to allow new camps on Thai soil. This resulted in there being three camps actually located on the Burma side of the border. Halockanee was relocated from Loh Loe in January 1994, Karenni Camp 2 was relocated in August 1993, and a new Karen camp on the Burma side of the Moei River was set up at Klay Mo Ko. This was a precarious situation, dependent on continued access for relief agencies and the guarantees of safety from SLORC attacks. This precarity was drawn into sharp relief when Halockanee camp in Mon State was attacked in July 1994, sending 4000 refugees over the border to Thailand for several weeks. Combined with flooding due to record rains that year TBC had to launch an emergency appeal for $1million of extra funding.

Beginning in 1995, however, a major development regarding armed conflict had huge, permanent impacts on displacement and refugee communities. A section of rank-and-file soldiers from the KNU, unhappy at perceived Christian dominance of KNU leadership, broke away to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). A SLORC offensive against KNU's headquarters at Manerplaw, aided by this DKBA splinter group who knew the territory well, resulted in the KNU's loss of this politically and symbolically important place in early 1995. It was important not just for the KNU as its show-piece headquarters, but for the various pro-democracy forces and other organisations also based there. After the fall, SLORC forces continued their military operations north and south of Manerplaw, taking control of territory on the Moei and Salween Rivers. This led to a wave of refugees seeking safety over the border in Thailand, and TBC reported its biggest population increase in a six month period – up to 91,000 from 77,000.

The 1995 offensive against Manerplaw was a huge military victory for the SLORC, after which they controlled the border area from Mae Sot up to Mae Sariang. They did not stop there though, and 1995 started a period of the fall of what was then a 'bufferzone' on the border. A short-lived ceasefire in 1995 with the Karenni National Progressive Party broke down and a new offensive, including the use of airstrikes, was enough for SLORC to effectively take control of the Karenni border by April 1996. More offensives against the KNU in the years following the fall of Manerplaw, as well as the surrender of Khun Sa in Shan State meant that by 1997, the ethnic 'bufferzone' along the border with Thailand has fallen and the SLORC/SPDC controlled most of this area.

To make matters worse, DKBA began intrusions onto Thai soil, intimidating refugees, assassinating KNU leaders, and burning down houses. 6,000 refugees were made homeless and two killed in the first months of 1995 due to these forays. This was a particularly challenging time for TBC, and especially for KRC, as individuals within the committee had family members directly affected. With rains coming, refugees living in fear of violence, and houses destroyed, TBC had to act quickly to respond. This also resulted in the biggest funding crisis to date for TBC, as the emergencies of 1995 meant that there was very little cash carried over into 1996, while the needs of the programme had significantly increased due to the higher number of refugees. For the first months of 1996, TBC was in debt to its suppliers, at some points as much as $2million. A subsequent donor meeting convened in 1996, largely in response to this crisis, was an opportunity for TBC to urge its donors to schedule receipts two months in advance to try to avoid the cashflow problem experienced in early 1996.

Camp Consolidation

One of the most important implications of this emergency situation was the beginning of a plan by the Thai government to consolidate the various smaller camps into a few larger camps, the reasoning being that larger camps are easier to defend given the real threat of attack from over the border. While this was an understandable response, there was concern that this would replace the village-style settlements that promoted self-sufficiency among the refugee populations since the beginning of the camps in 1984. Larger, more 'town-style' camps would impact the relief programme, making the refugees more aid-dependent. TBC managed to negotiate a compromise whereby camp consolidation would happen, but this wouldn't be to the extent originally mooted. However attacks on the refugee camps continued until 1998 as DKBA troops would enter camps, murdering and robbing refugees and threatening them with more violence. In the first six months of 1996 alone, the Thai army reported 44 DKBA incursions, resulting in 14 deaths. In 1997, with another huge increase in refugees, bringing the population in the camps up to 116,000 due to a renewed offensive by SLORC, the DKBA attacked three refugee camps, destroying Wangka and Don Pa Kiang camps before being repelled from Mae La camp. This left 7,000 refugees homeless and catalysed a more security-focussed strategy towards refugee camps from Thai authorities. Subsequently, the fencing in of the camps, stricter controls of movement in and out and more stringent restrictions on what activities were permitted in camps were enacted by Thai security forces.

The camp consolidation process, which was catalysed by these attack starting in 1995, continued apace, with seven camps closed in the first 6 months of 1998. Sometimes these camp consolidations were undertaken haphazardly without proper planning and sometimes with force. By 1998, the NGOs that were part of TBC were able to negotiate the details with local authorities, organising transportation with the Thai army for 9,000 refugees, and purchasing construction materials for housing and public buildings at the new sites for a total of 15,000 refugees. By the end of 1998, TBC was providing assistance in 17 locations, four of which were across the border, compared with 30 at the beginning of 1995. The consolidations were not 100% welcomed, and a protest against being moved from Mae Ye Hta Camp to the new Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp occurred in February 1998, with camp residents refusing to move due to security concerns at the new camp. Restraint, patience, and negotiation between the refugee leaders, the Refugee Committee, the Thai army and other Thai authorities, however, meant that the situation was resolved peacefully.

The new security-based restrictions, including not permitting refugees to go outside to find work, forage, or cut down bamboo or wood resulted in TBC having to provide all of the building materials for some camps, extend the distribution of yellow beans and soya bean oil as food supplements in order to maintain basic nutritional needs, and supply sawdust logs for cooking fuel in many places. This meant that the refugees became more aid dependent. Apart from this growing aid dependency, the more stringent camp conditions reduced quality of life for refugees, deterred potential newcomers, and resulted in some leaving to try their luck as part of the huge migrant workforce that lives in Thailand, many of whom are undocumented and share similar experiences in their homeland and characteristics of those refugees living in the camps.

Jack Dunford, Former Executive Director – The fall of Manerplaw changed everything. Until then, we believed that the refugees would go home, sooner rather than later. Although more crowded than their villages in Burma, life in camps was like an extension of life on the other side of the border. Refugees were largely self-reliant other than our basic food support, but when Manerplaw fell the camps were attacked from across the border and had to be consolidated to make them safer. Larger camps led to more restrictions and refugees lost much of their independence. They could no longer scavenge in the forest and jungles around the camps and the consortium model in its original form was no longer adequate. We had to start supplying additional food items, bamboo and thatch as building materials, and charcoal and firewood for cooking. The refugee's homelands had been overrun and hopes of an early return had faded.

Supporting camps inside Myanmar

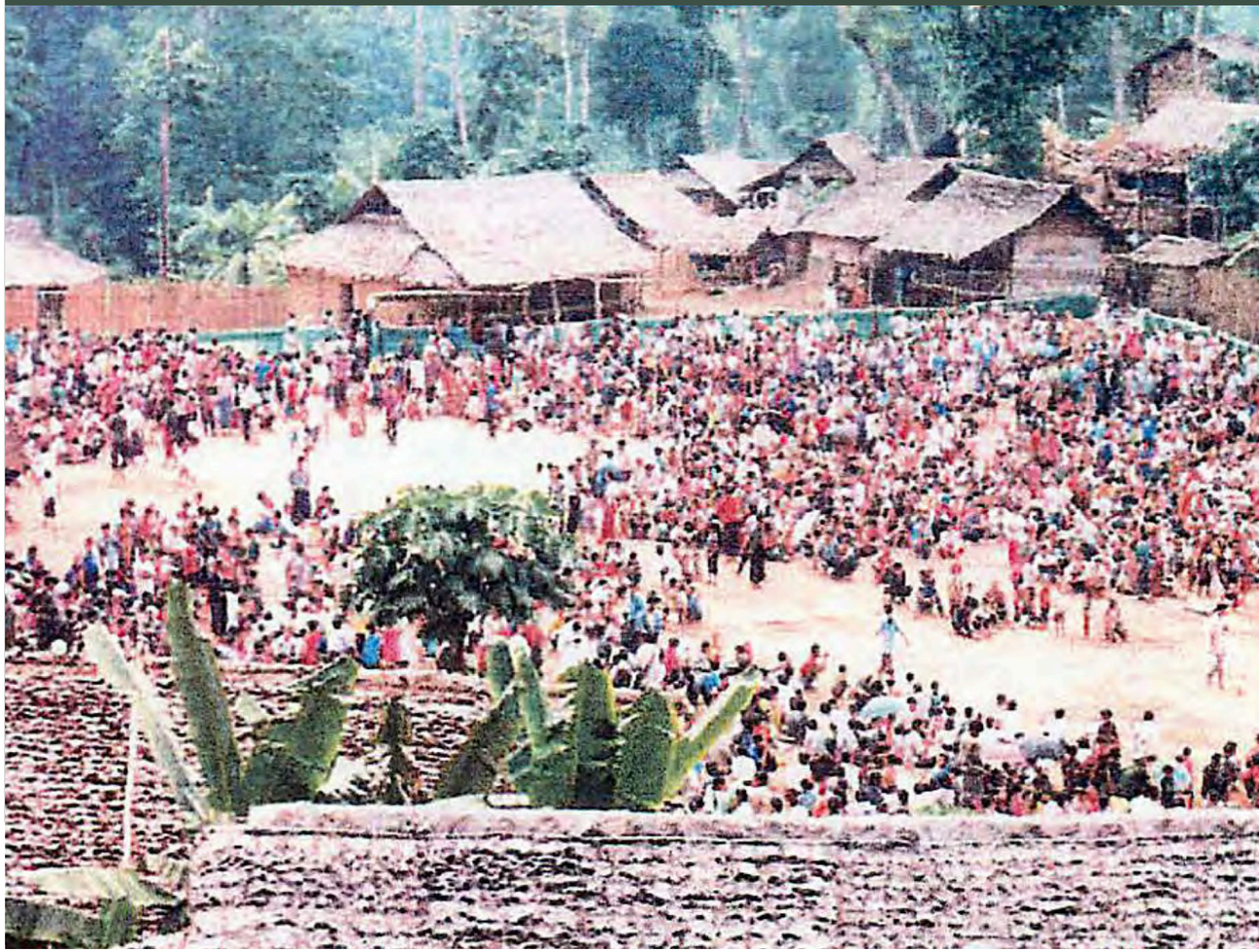
As part of the 1995 ceasefire between the New Mon State Party and SLORC, all the Mon refugee camps were relocated over the border to Burma, including Halockanee. They still lived very close to the border in conditions not too dissimilar to the refugee camps in Thailand.
Access for aid agencies from Rangoon was not possible and as such, TBC continued to provide humanitarian assistance in partnership with the Mon Relief and Development Committee. It was hoped that the rice provisions, mixed with microfinance development initiatives would result in a more sustainable, self-sufficient solution yet due to lack of social services, poor infrastructure, constant new arrivals and lack of access to agricultural land, the goal of self-reliance remained elusive. TBC was still able to supply relief support to these camps, a situation that would be ongoing for over 20 years.

TBC also supported other displacement sites over the border, primarily through food such as rice, including Karen camps along the Moei River, and to around 6,000 displaced persons in IDP sites in Shan State. Working with the Shan Refugee Committee, additional support has also been provided to a displacement site in Wang Hieng Province, northern Thailand, which has been home to several hundred refugees, although they are not recognised as such by the Thai government.

Internal Displacement and Relocations

As SLORC (later SPDC) forces gained territorial control of southeastern Burma, the causes of displacement began to evolve. While direct armed conflict continued to displace villagers, with SLORC troops establishing a permanent presence in many areas of the southeast, human rights violations related to forced labour, forced relocations, extortion, the torching of villages, destruction of food stores and crops, theft of livestock and property, extra-judicial killings, and rape, were all every day occurrences affecting hundreds of thousands of people. The forced relocations of whole villages to areas more directly under military control which began in 1996 created massive upheaval and was one of the main contributing factors to a sharp increase in internal displacement. At relocation sites, villagers reported a lack of access to food, safe drinking water, services, agricultural land, and faced demands for forced labour and other abuses. This occurred throughout the southeast, from Tenasserim through Mon, Karen and up to Karenni and Shan States.

Since 2002, in partnership with ethnic community-based organisations, TBC has been documenting, researching and analysing these trends, producing annual reports on internal displacement. According to TBC and partners' research, by 2006, at least 3,000 ethnic villages had been destroyed since 1996, affecting over one million people. Probably more than 300,000 had fled to Thailand as refugees (the majority being Shan and not recognised as refugees by the Thai government). TBC estimated in 2006 that there were still around 500,000 IDPs in the border areas of Burma, including at least 95,000 in free-fire areas, 287,000 in cease-fire areas (including 11,000 in Mon resettlement sites) and 118,000 in relocation sites. The 2006 population in the camps in Thailand meanwhile, had reached 154,000. Many of the new arrivals in the camps were previously internally displaced people inside Burma.



UNHCR

In late 1997 discussions began with the Thai government about the possibility of the UN's refugee agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) becoming involved along the border for the first time, and in 1998 an agreement was reached for a protection and monitoring role. For many years UNHCR were simply not present on the border. For the Thai government, they maintained that this displacement was 'temporary' and did not want to institutionalise the situation as occurred with the largescale Cambodia refugee camp context in previous years. Yet thcross border incursions by the DKBA into Thai territory, attacks on refugee camps,

camp consolidations, and securitisation of the camps which characterised the previous years led to the consideration of UNHCR becoming involved in a protection role. TBC at the time welcomed the protection role that UNHCR could play, as well as helping to find durable solutions for refugees, but there was initial concern that the 'village-style' largely refugee run, light-NGO footprint may be impacted. After becoming fully operational in 1999, with offices opened in Mae Hong Son, Mae Sot, and Kanchanaburi, the UNHCR, with the Thai government, began the first official headcount and registration. In the past, the refugee committees would provide TBC with numbers and this would becoming the feeding figure and this still happens. The Thai government/UNHCR official headcount and registration, conducted in March and April 1999, was aided by the efficient and cooperative help of the refugee committees. The official number, 100,000, was very similar to the refugee committees' number of 95,000, with the difference likely due to some refugees travelling between camps on the day of the headcount or choosing not to register. The similarity of the figures was a testament to the integrity and competence of 15 years of accurate record-keeping by the refugee committees.

Another benefit of UNHCR presence was that, since 1997 the official Thai policy for new refugees was to only accept those who were 'fleeing from fighting' but many refugees were fleeing due to indirect consequences of conflict such as forced labour, increased militarisation, loss of their homes and livelihoods, or other human rights violations. However, under the terms of the agreement with the Thai government, UNHCR became involved in the screening process for new arrivals and subsequently, these were now accepted into the camps and were able to be provided for by TBC and the refugee committees. The situation of new refugee registration ebbed and flowed over the years, and in the early 2000s, wishing not to create too much of a 'pull' factor, the Thai authorities largely stopped officially registering new refugees[8]. Yet people continued to arrive as the situation back in their homeland remained dangerous and in 2005 a second official UNHCR registration/headcount was completed.

[8]Historically, from the presence of Indochinese refugees in the 1970s up until the current coup situation in Myanmar today, the Thai government has had a preference for 'humane deterrence' in that they do not encourage displaced people to cross the border, nor to stay permanently.

Jack Dunford, Former Executive Director –At the beginning very few people understood or were interested in the ethnic conflict in Burma. Because the UN was not involved on the border many people did not even consider people in the camps to be refugees, often just dismissing them as "insurgents." This was just fine in the early years. The refugees were effectively still under the administration of ethnic authorities across the border and expected to return home soon. They had not been cut off from their homelands and the consortium model helped preserve the federal dream. But as the years passed and refugee numbers increased with no end in sight, a lack of "official" recognition of these people as refugees became an issue. It limited the effectiveness of our advocacy with the Thai Government and we were always concerned that the problem would become too big for us to handle as NGOs and would need the international community to step in.

UNHCR's first priority was to register the camp population as refugees under the UN convention and recognition was no longer an issue. However, although UNHCR was only given a protection role, its presence highlighted the uniqueness of BBC's community-based model of assistance based on trust, which in many ways contradicted accepted practice. By working directly with the ethnic people, we undoubtedly empowered them and helped sustain their aspirations. This was a problem for UNHCR and some donors at times, contravening, in their eyes, principles of neutrality.

UNHCR's arrival coincided with big changes in the aid industry with Donors demanding more accountability and higher minimum standards. BBC was forced to make many changes to its programmes and procedures and the community-based model was constantly challenged. But BBC's response was always to involve the refugees in all decision making and in the design and implementation of these changes. Almost against the odds, BBC's was able to preserve the fundamental philosophy and goals of the refugee-managed camp model

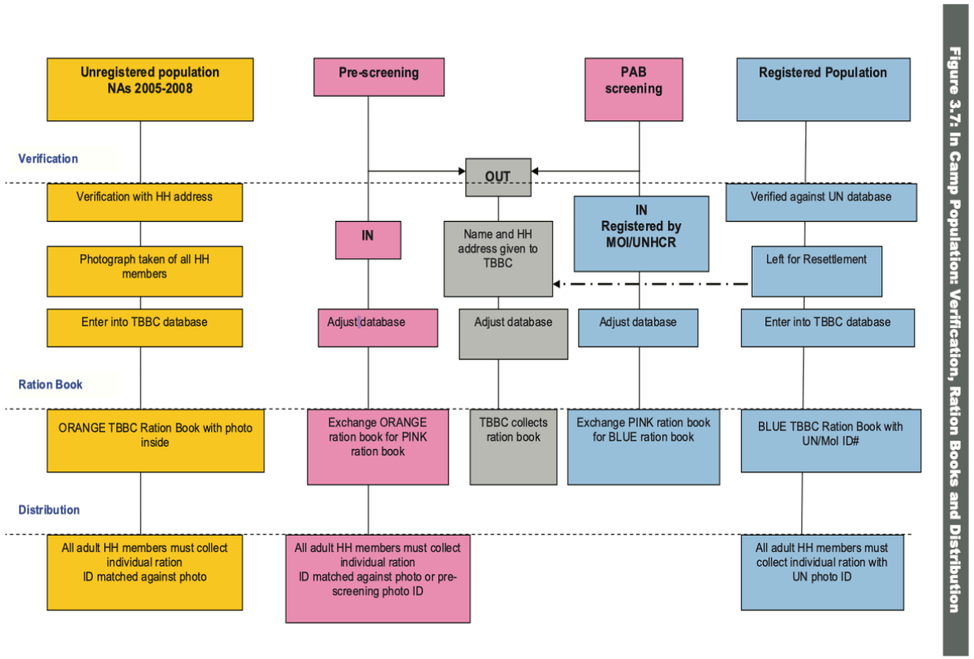


Figure 3.7: In Camp Population: Verification, Ration Books and Distribution

Evolution of TBC's Programme

With the increases in refugee population and the changes of how the camps were set up, TBC also began to evolve. In 1996, at the time when TBC moved away from its informal model to a more institutionalised structure, there were just seven staff. By 2000 this had increased to 19 and by 2006 there were 50. There needed to be more field staff to liaise with Thai authorities, given the new restrictions placed on the camps. Furthermore, with the refugees becoming more aid dependent, more supplies were needed to be delivered to the refugees. In fact, at the beginning, in 1984, the original aim of what was then called CCA was to cover most but not all of the staple diet needs with the responsibility to bridge the gap covered by the refugees themselves, ensuring a level of self-reliance. However, as the camps became more tightly controlled by Thai authorities, including not being able to leave the camps to find work or forage, by the mid-1990s, TBC was providing 100% of the food needs. And with more food needs meant more administrative costs and staffing. Added to this is that donors began requiring more 'professionalised' standards of transparency and accountability. This included responding to requirements for indicators to measure programme performance, international standards of competitive bidding and independent monitoring of the quality and distribution of supplies.

Population Verification Mae la 2015

Of course, the standards that the donors require are about increasing efficiency, accountability and effectiveness of the programme, but a challenge was to accommodate these without impacting the unique relationship between the programme and the refugee communities who were substantively involved in running their own lives and sharing responsibility for the programme. One concrete example of this is that ECHO, the EU's humanitarian aid body, and previously a major donor of TBC, required particular quality control tests for the relief provision. In the past, TBC relied on the Refugee Committees to check the weights and quality of provision, familiar with the provisions as they had been for many years. The worry was that introducing an external professional inspection company would be a sign of distrust towards the refugee communities. This type of problem has been a long-term balancing act for TBC, of maintaining the partnership with refugees whilst satisfying the donors requirements. Throughout its existence, TBC has worked particularly hard to ensure that it maintained its original philosophy of ensuring refugees' agency and that they are responsible for running their own affairs by involving the refugee committees in developing these new procedures. It does remain, however, an ongoing challenge.

As well as increased food needs, TBC began to expand its programme in a whole host of ways. Nutrition surveys, clothing delivery, agriculture projects, education, sanitation, income generation projects, gender empowerment, protection and good governance are just a few. On top of such activities, the bureaucratic and administrative needs grew hugely, and tendering, monitoring, procurement, financial controls and auditing all became essential components of TBC's work. External evaluations became a regular occurrence, whether on specific needs such as adequate nutrition provisions in the food baskets for refugees or for overall programme implementation.

Naw Ta Mla Saw Karen Womens Organisation General Secretary : Sometimes, international norms are not defined clearly, nor translated well to our language, nor put into context to fit our living conditions. Often the information or explanations, do not recognize the poverty and limited freedoms, the lack of power of refugees under which we live. Often as refugees we are not the decision makers how we live. Sometimes we see an "international Issue" just pushed on to the community. Without enough relevant communication. Sometimes the definition is too narrow. For example, the international focus for child protection is often only about sexual abuse, whereas we see Child Protection as a much broader issue.

TBC also supported various other community needs along the border including a safe house in Sangkhlaburi, support to Thai communities, for example during episodes of flooding, or during the 1997 financial crisis. Thankfully, donors continued to support the programme, and new donors were found. By the start of the 2000s, most funding was from governments, as opposed to the faith-based funds that started the programme in 1984. A website went online in 2006 while a reference centre containing the extensive collection of photographs and documentation was established in TBC's main office in Bangkok. In 2004, TBC became registered as a charity in the UK under the name, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium.

When the Facts Change, the Name Changes

The original name was the Consortium of Christian Agencies, mirroring the faith-based character of the founding relief agencies. In 1991 CCA became the Burma Border Consortium (BBC) to recognise the participation of non-Christian agencies in the Consortium. In 2004, as part of it restructuring, BBC aimed to formally register in the UK as a charitable company. However, another, rather established organisation had the name 'BBC' in the UK and so the new name – The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) was chosen. Unfortunately, another TBBC already had the website domain name, the Thai Bangkew Breeder Club (a type of dog) but the domain address was agreed to be sold after an amicable negotiation for $150. Lastly, the current name, the Border Consortium, which came into being in November 2012, was in order to reflect the overtures of the Burma/Myanmar government and to facilitate a greater and more official presence inside the country – the name 'Burma' still a sensitive issue for the Myanmar government.

Visibility

TBC, as matter of policy, has always tried to maintain a low profile, with its vehicles and property previously unmarked, and donor publicity such as stickers not visible. This was due to several reasons, including the equal partnership with refugee committees, ensuring mutuality and dignity, and not wanting to have conscious reminders to refugees that they were dependent on outside aid. It would also be impractical given the large amount of donors that TBC has at any given time. However, from 2001 certain donors required 'visibility' as a grant condition. Again, TBC worked to compromise, and visibility was implemented in some components of the programme. For example there were certain 'visibility' projects which were beneficial to refugees such as educational activities, or visibility items such as footballs or notebooks contained the donors' logo if it was contractually required. This is another example of the balancing act between donor requirements and the philosophy of the programme based on refugee self-governance.

CHAPTER THREE :

Refugee Agency and Self Organisation

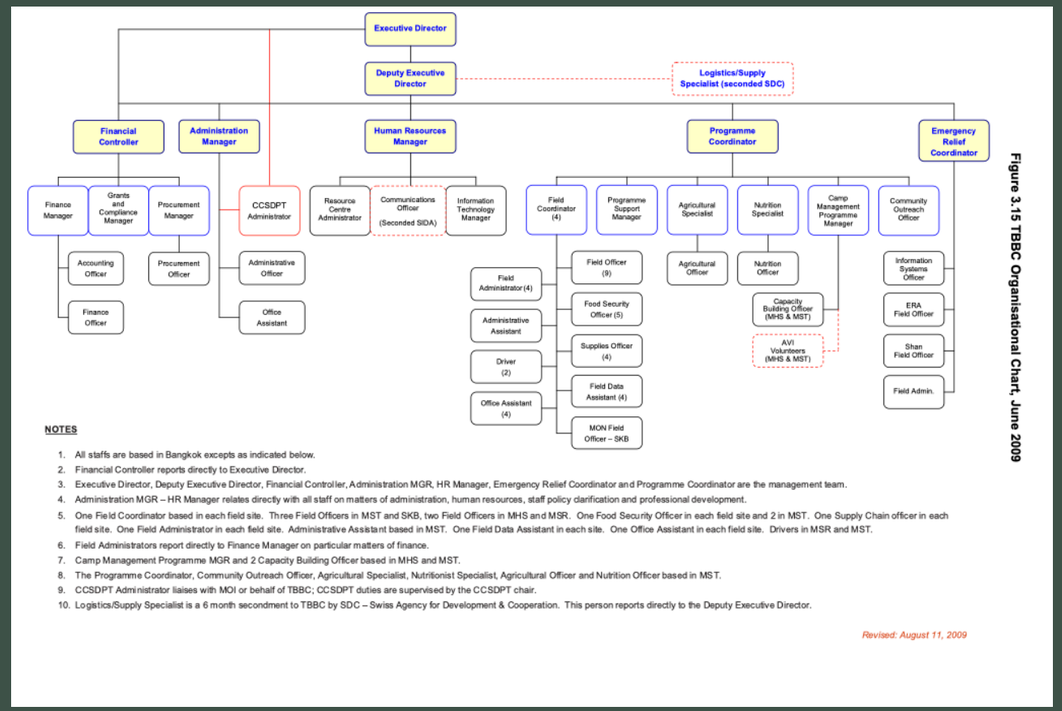
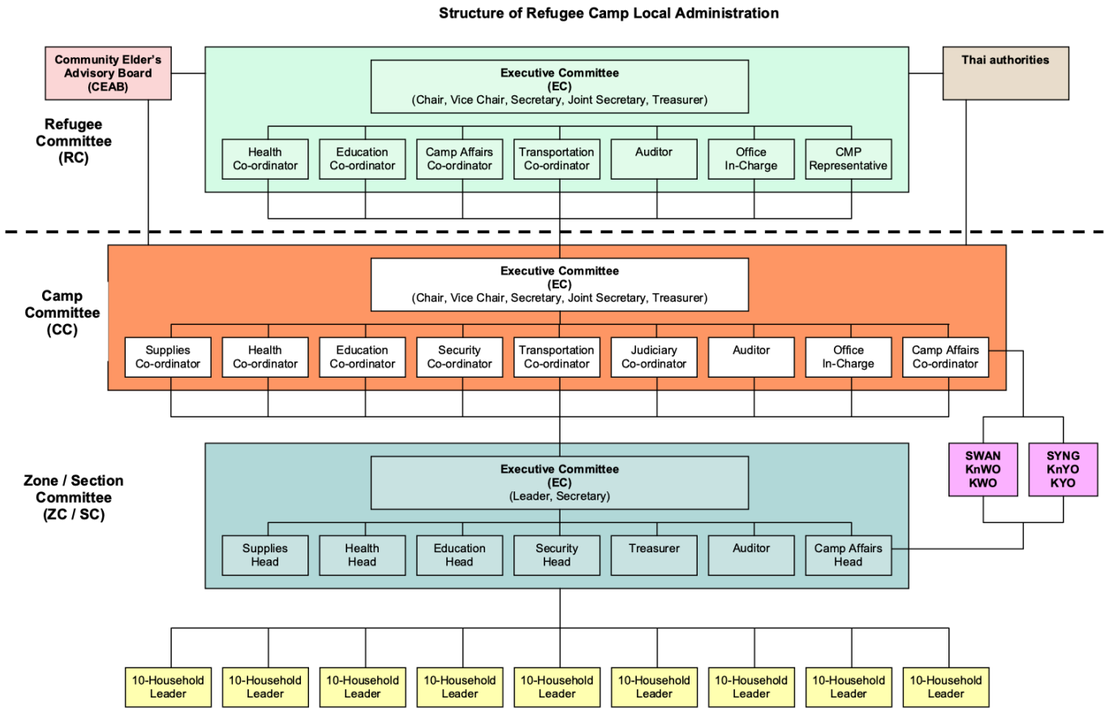


Figure 3.15 TBBC Organisational Chart, June 2009

Camp Governance

The long history of the camps is one marked by cooperation, equal partnership, and mutual respect. Relationships among refugees, between camp committees and refugee committees, and between aid agencies, including TBC, and the refugee community have become stronger and more durable as challenges have been faced together. In fact, the ups and downs of camp life, including the aforementioned cross-border attacks by the DKBA and SLORC troops, ration cuts due to a reduction in donor funding, the challenges of resettlement, ensuring social cohesion, fading hopes in a permanent political solution to the conflict, and adapting to a modern, digitised world, have been dealt with because of the strength of relationships between refugee communities and TBC, forged over decades. There is a real sense of community in the camps, with a democratic and accountable leadership in the form of refugee committees and camp committees. This section will highlight some of the ways this has occurred, bringing to light the remarkable capacity and organisation of the refugee communities themselves, and how TBC has worked to support them.

The Karen, Karenni, and Mon Refugee Committees are the main coordinating body for the refugees, liaising with NGOs that provide assistance, the UNHCR and the Thai authorities. The 15 members of the largest – KRC- were initially selected based on Community Elder's Advisory Boards' recommendations (8 members), who also provide guidance to the Refugee Committees, and seven representatives from the camp committees. Each camp has its own camp committee which is involved in the day-to-day running of the administration and management of camps. They consist of an executive committee and various subcommittees that deal with issues such as supplies, health, education, camp affairs, justice, and security. Decentralised further, there are section or zone committees with a similar structure to the camp committees. There are also ten-household representatives, mirroring the structure inside Myanmar.



Note: Due to their semi-autonomous nature, camp administrative systems vary widely from camp to camp. The above example illustrates their basic structure

Thailand's Refugee Governance

The Royal Thai Government has the ultimate authority over the refugee camps, with the Ministry of Interior implementing policy set by the National Security Council via district-level authorities. Under the Ministry of Interior, the Operations Centre for Displaced Persons approves the delivery of supplies from TBC to the camps. Each camp has a palat, a Ministry of Interior local District Officer, who serves as camp commander directing local security forces.

Second Lieutenant, Soramongkhon Mangalasiri, Director of Foreign Affairs Division Ministry of Interior and Deputy Director of Operation Center for Displaced Persons : Over the past four decades, there have been significant humanitarian challenges in hosting displaced persons. Despite facing economic hardships, the people of Thailand adhere to humanitarian ideals and recognise their obligation to care for displaced individuals from other countries.

Furthermore, as with other aspects of camp life, the committees evolved and adapted to a changing context and selection has become more democratic over the years, with all members selected subsequent to a more democratic process. In 1998, the Karen Refugee Committee revised its Constitution and held elections to make the committee more representative and TBC helped with capacity-building sessions. TBC has continued to support such grassroots democracy and in 2013, TBC worked with the Karen Refugee Committee and the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC) to write a new suite of guidelines for the elections which helped ensure stronger representation for women, establish procedures for a secret ballot, and involve the participation of unregistered refugees. TBC helped administer the elections, provided materials and support for election promotion, and TBC staff acted as election observers for all polling processes. Out of the 15 new KRC committee members in 2013, seven were women (an increase from 20 to 46 per cent) while the KnRC included a provision that a minimum of 30% of candidates must be women.

This short explanation does not cover the complexity and scale of administration and governance in the camps, but it gives an idea of the very high levels of structure and organisation that the refugees themselves have established. This community-based camp management model has underwritten TBC's approach to ensure rights of refugees to self-determination and dignity despite displacement, and has been since day one. It is unique, and enables refugees to participate in decision making, programme design and implementation and contributing to the longer term vision of self-reliance. In fact, in 2007, an exchange initiative between TBC staff and the Lutheran World Foundation working with Bhutanese refugees in Nepal highlighted the stark contrasts between the principally self-autonomous management of the Thai camps and those in Nepal in which UNHCR had been the major camp management actor since their inception. The LWF staff were keen to learn from the camp committees and CBOs in Thailand. A 2000 DanChurchAid evaluation in

regard to what was then a new set of guidelines for humanitarian assistance – the Sphere Guidelines- concluded that "BBC's highly principled approach is technically efficient and effective, but perhaps more important, it has supported and contributed to a feeling of self-esteem, dignity and empowerment which can not be found in most refugee populations."[9]

Naw Ta Mla Saw Karen Womens Organisation General Secretary : TBC has supported refugee-led camps in many ways and the 'Camp Support Project' has been an important cornerstone to women being part of that leadership. The "Camp Support" project came out of a need to provide some financial support to women leaders in KWO in the refugee camps who were providing a wide range of services and leadership to the community. The women receive a small stipend in order to make it possible for them to work full-time for the many leadership duties they are asked to perform. These women provide social welfare case management, advocacy for daily needs, particularly for women and children, solve daily problems, organize programs and manage disputes. The project has been in place for many years and has allowed the development of over 1000 women leaders. These women are vital to the survival and growth of the Karen Community.

For the first years of the camp, in its more simplified programme, the KRC and other refugee committees would take responsibility for camp management. This included negotiation with Thai authorities regarding camp locations and taking care of all aspects of building and construction. Refugee committees would send monthly reports of camp populations, the assistance received and issues of concern. In fact, the first ever external evaluation of the TBC programme by Dutch Interchurch Aid found the programme to be successful due to "the high level of responsibility of aid recipients (men and women) at all levels."[10]

[9] Burma Border Consortium Six Monthly Report, January – June, 2000. Appendix E. Page 53.
[10] Burma Border Consortium Six Monthly Report, January – June, 1994. Page 37.

Cost effectiveness:	The cost effectiveness of this relatively simple relief programme, implemented by the refugee committees themselves, was very high. For example, in 1996, at which point TBC had only five staff, the total staffing, administrative and vehicle costs amounted to just 3% of the total budget. Even as the programme grew, the cost per person per day remained very small. By 2003, for example, even after the expansion of the programme to 31 staff, the programme only cost around $0.30 per refugee per day. By 2010, by which point the programme had 78 staff (one staff per 1,900 refugees) the cost per refugee per day was still only $0.69. This reflects not just the cost efficiency of TBC programming, but one of the plethora of benefits of implementing a relief programme through the refugee organisations themselves.

Growth and Adaptation

Yet times changed and throughout the 1990s the political developments in Burma reduced the resources available to Karen authorities, which in turn meant that they were struggling to cover the costs of administration. TBC thus allowed the camp committees to keep the used rice sacks and containers to sell on, the revenue of which would support camp committee expenses such as stationary, photocopying, torch batteries for night security patrols, funerals, commemoration days, festivals, travel costs to town, entertainment of visitors and Thai authorities, and social welfare for vulnerable families and individuals. These expenses grew naturally as the camp populations increased, and so TBC started to sell back the rice sacks

Public forum Umpiem 2013

themselves and allocate the revenue to the camp committees. By 2000, 70% of the credit received was given to the camp committees for such administration costs. However, in an example of growing together, new donor requirements in terms of procurement eventually led to the introduction of polypropylene rice sacks as oppose to traditional jute sacks. These new rice sacks had a resale value of just one Thai Baht compared to 20 Thai Baht that the jute sacks had – removing a major source of funding for the refugee camp committees. Both TBC and the camp committees had to adapt, and they did so together. TBC began, in 2002, to include camp administration costs as a budget line based on six monthly operating expense budgets drawn up by the camp committees, with volunteer stipends paid that were commensurate that the health and education NGOs would pay refugee volunteers. As ever, this was designed and implemented with the trust and cooperation between the refugees and TBC.

One of the challenges that the refugee authorities have faced is the growing ethnic diversity of the camp populations. The first refugees were almost all Karen, and Mon and Karenni camps were set up after 1990 although the Mon camps were relocated back to Burma in the 1990s (Mon refugees do remain living in the camps in Thailand, but form a minority). The post-1988 demonstrations brought ethnic Burman students from the cities, while trickles of other ethnic groups continued to arrive in the 1990s and 2000s. Especially after 2005, the ethnic make-up of the camps began to diversify. The Karen were still by far the most populous but as camps became less ethnically homogenous, the camp authorities took measures to ensure diverse representation and inclusivity. The KRC and the Mae La Camp Committee in 2010 established the Coordinating Committee for Ethnic Groups and a Camp Committee Advisory Board which included representatives of various religious and ethnicities that lived in the camp. Both of these bodies worked closely with the main camp committee in coordinating, planning and implementing activities. For example, ethnic minority representatives were included in Mae La's nine-member New Arrivals Committee, which was responsible for verifying new arrivals. Muslim representatives were part of various committees in Mae La and Umphiem Mai such as Code of Conduct, Boarding House and Livelihoods Committees. This commitment to inclusivity and diverse representation is even more remarkable given at the time the Thai policy was that new arrivals were not being registered with the Thai MOI and unregistered refugees were not allowed to take positions of authority or work in education and health services. These pro-active and creative steps demonstrate a commitment to ensuring inclusivity of the camp authorities so that ethnic minorities become part of the camp community.

TBC has also supported several initiatives as part of its programme to ensure this ethnic diversity. An important step towards this was the recruitment of a community liaison officer in 2005 (renamed community outreach officer in 2009), tasked initially with meeting with and mapping community organisations in the camps so as to address ethnic, gender, and other inequalities in representation and participation in camp life. Almost immediately this led to more inclusive and better feedback towards TBC programming which was promptly acted on. The changes brought about may not appear to be major, but the small improvements such as better choice of mosquito nets, or delivery of salt once a month rather than every 2-3 months due to bags splitting, are nevertheless important aspects of daily life in the camps. In another example, for the Muslim community, based on community feedback, rations were adjusted so that a halal alternative, in the form of beans, was offered instead of the typical fishpaste. Various other methods of outreach, communication and feedback have been implemented to ensure that TBC is sensitive to the diverse needs of the camps, and to target those who may be vulnerable or potentially marginalised. Public forums, community consultations, communication points, and comment boxes have all been useful at various points. Partnership with the Karen Student Network Group, who established a radio programme for the camps in the late 1990s, has been an effective communication channel, for example to broadcast changes to the food basket. Refugees want to be making decisions about their own lives, and the more that TBC has been able to connect, receive feedback and act on these suggestions, the more smoothly the programme runs, the more effective the various projects are, and most importantly, the refugees themselves play an active role in the running of the camps.

Annual Workshop for Camp Management Planning in Mae La Camp

Peace Dah, Former Chairperson, Karen Student Network Group :
KSNG has been promoting the rights and advancing opportunities for Karen students to become involved in a variety of social work. The biggest achievement that we gained regarding our work in camps would be that the students are getting involved in management and leadership roles that are interesting in camp activities. Additionally, we see that they are not only learning in the classroom but also becoming well-trained for their future steps. On the other hand, the students are getting the opportunity to meet and engage with camp leaders, committees, and other CBOs, CSOs, and NGOs in the camps. There are many students who have worked at KSNG and have became leaders in Karen society, including overseas, taking responsibility and becoming the supporter for our Karen people. We are very proud that KSNG has taught us many skills and become an important section of support for our Karen people.

The partnership with community based and civil-society organisations who are staffed by refugees themselves play a crucial role in complementing the work of the refugee and camp committees, providing social welfare, organising activities, advocating for the advancement of human rights, or playing a protection role. Women's groups, such as the Karen Women's Organisation, the Karenni Women's Organisation or the Muslim Women's Association have been instrumental in promoting and protecting women's rights and ensuring that gender perspectives are included in both camp administration and TBC programming. TBC has been happy to support such groups for many years in terms of core support for basic materials, administrative costs, and project management.

Weaving

For 20 years, TBC supported women's organisations in a weaving project to produce longyis and htameins. Such traditional, wraparound garments for the lower body are still the most common clothing item in the camps. Organised by the Karen Women's Organisation and the Karenni Women's Organisation, TBC provided the threads and funds for to make one longyi for every woman and man in alternate years. It started in 2002 in Mae La camp and by 2004 all camps were producing their own supplies. Not only did this project maintain and develop traditional skills, it also provided income generation and developed the capacity of the women's organisations in all aspects of project management. Due to funding constraints TBC had to end support to the weaving project in 2012 but continued support to weavers through entrepreneurial development training programme continued.

Weaving Project: The Karen and Karenni Womens Organisations have arranged trainings in the camps to provide sufficient weavers to produce longyis for men and women in the camps in alternate years.

The idea of gender inclusivity was simply not a major part of either the camps, nor CCA, as it was known then, forty years ago. Indeed, in Burmese and Thai society, as well as the aid world, this was not a primary concern. However, developments such as the increasing number of women in camp authority positions, the important and respected programmes that women's groups have implemented in the camps, and the dozen-plus, camp safe houses TBC has supported for survivors of gender-based violence, have gone hand-in-hand with TBC's own policies towards gender equality within the organisation. Gender sensitivity trainings, a gender policy, and gender-balanced staffing are just a few of the key aspects of TBC's organisational structure and identity that have grown alongside the inclusivity, representation and participation of women in the camps. It has been a process of TBC and refugee communities learning from each other to improve the situation for all refugees in the camps.

Naw Noe Myar Vice Chairperson, The Karenni Women's Organisation: The Karenni Women's Organization provides trainings and raises awareness on gender-based violence, women's rights, child rights, early marriage and its consequences to women, men, and adolescent groups, both girls and boys. Furthermore, KnWO conducts household visits to vulnerable and most vulnerable families to provide information on CBO services that can be obtained in the camp and make connections if necessary. KnWO is giving Thai law training to community leaders, and some of the CBOs in the camp. KnWO also provides women with livelihood activities in the camp for women or mothers to access the skills and to have some income in the future.

Community-based development

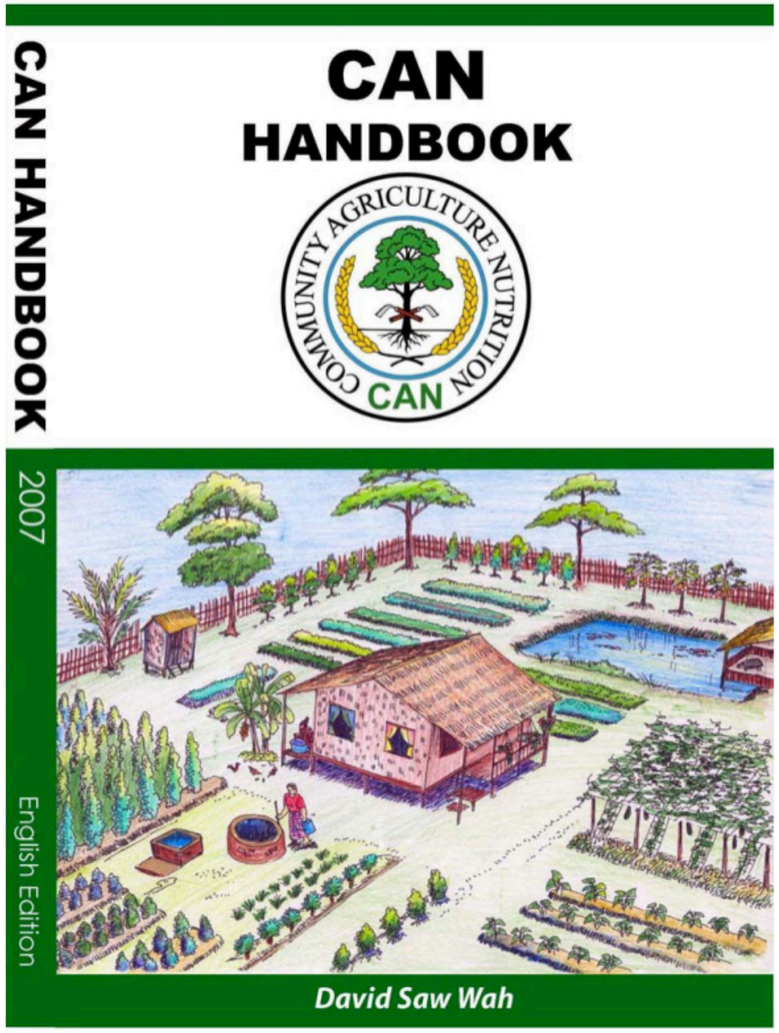
For the most part, relationships with local Thai villages and the refugee communities have been managed well, with effort put in by all actors to ensure that potential for conflict and tension of having large village-like camps on their doorstep do not place undue pressure on existing communities. TBC has worked hard over the years to support these local villages in times of financial hardship or emergency such as flooding. However, one particularly beneficial project has been the Community-Based Natural Resource Management project in which two committees comprising both Thai villagers and refugee representatives, and working under camp management structures, were established in 2013 at Mae Ra Ma Luang and Mae La Oon Camps. They set rules and regulations on the joint utilisation of local resources and numerous coordination events helped the camp communities and Thai villagers to share information and coordinate natural resource management, especially in order to respond to problems such as forest fires, watershed areas and deforestation. TBC has supported this by facilitating trainings to increase capacity in such community-based natural resource management activities. This project has contributed to conflict prevention, management and resolution, developing a common understanding and collective action for sustainable natural resource management, but also strengthened relationships between the camp population and the surrounding Thai villagers. Now called Community Driven Natural Resource Management, it is present in all nine camps.

One of the most important refugee-led, and indeed refugee conceptualised projects, has been related to ensuring a nutritious diet for camp residents. In 2000 the Thai MOI encouraged the NGOs working with refugees to support projects that would enable refugees to increase agricultural production for their own consumption. Started by a member

of the Karenni Refugee Committee, David Saw Wah, the Community Agriculture and Nutrition Project (CAN) has been one of the success stories of camp life. It aims to develop the production of indigenous food crops using only locally sourced materials in the context of minimal access to land and water, all the while developing skills for longer term food security. Activities include training in food production, a handbook in various languages, demonstration sites, community gardens, establishment of seed banks, and support to animal husbandry techniques. After its initial success in the early 2000s in the Karenni camps, TBC supported the extension of the project to all the camps by providing the tools, fencing and seeds for participants in CAN trainings in order to establish their home gardens as well as professional training for CAN staff.

CAN Handbook, 2007.

In 2008, with the trainings reaching household level in Mae La Camp, a follow-up ‘community walk’ was organised whereby camp residents visited each other’s households and shared local innovation and adaption in garden design. The uptake of the skills learned was huge, with 85 percent of the households that attended training having planted vegetables and applied techniques learnt. By 2011, tree saplings grown in camp nurseries run by CAN were being distributed to camps and nearby Thai villages.



CAN has been successful in supporting the nutrition needs of refugees by complementing food rations, preventing nutrient deficiencies, providing vocational skills that are transferable to life outside of camps, and catalysing community participation and ownership in planning decisions and allocation of resources. As the project grew, TBC expanded the number of full-time staff to support the various CAN programme activities.

A film about CAN, titled ‘Ma Doh Ma Ka,’ which in Karen language means ‘helping each other’ was produced and shown in various camps to thousands of refugees proving to be extremely popular. It is a story about two families helping each other to improve their lives through the growing of household gardens in Mae La Camp. The film shows how the CAN project can support households in establishing and maintaining kitchen gardens and also gives important tips on hygiene and good nutrition. It was able to mobilise agricultural and nutritional awareness and the value and importance of kitchen gardens. In a way the film, its title, and its content regarding CAN is a symbol of the way that the refugees have been ‘helping each other’ for decades, to be able to live healthier lives and be self-reliant, despite the immense challenges that life as a refugee brings.

"I make a saving of one hundred baht a week from not having to buy vegetables."

After the first CAN training in Ban Don Yang in January this year, Naw Rolay made some flat land beside her house, erected some fencing to protect her garden against chickens, and began planting vegetables in sacks. *"Sometimes I work the whole day - I'm happy to work hard, I like it".*

Rolay has since grown vegetables in more than 70 sacks to feed her household of six. She is now growing a variety of vegetables, including tomato, egg plant, pumpkin, chilli, cucumber and sorrel.

"I make a saving of one hundred baht a week from not having to buy vegetables. My family have been supplied with vegetables for more than one month now, my family are eating more vegetables, and we cut sorrel everyday. I am also helping my neighbours to start gardens; one neighbour has already attended the second CAN training".

[11]

[11] Thailand Burma Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, January – June, 2009. Page 24.

Reduce, reuse, recycle.
Photo credit: TBC

CHAPTER FOUR :

What happens to refugees?

What happens to refugees such as those living in the camps on the Thai-Myanmar border? What happens when this situation of displacement becomes protracted, with no sign of positive change in their homeland? What happens when returning, or repatriation, is not an option? There are two other primary options, or durable solutions as is the preferred term, for refugees- resettlement to a third country or integration- both of which have a history in the camps.

Resettlement

In 2005, the Thai Government gave permission to allow for the resettlement of refugees from the camps to third countries. While some refugees, classed as 'persons of concern' were already being accepted by the US in 2004, the resettlement programme was a significant development in the history of the camps. Only those registered in the 2004/5 registration process were allowed to resettle. Initially the US stated they would accept 9,000 refugees, which was initially thought of as taking in the entire population of Tham Hin Camp, and if not all residents took up the offer, the balance would be offered to refugees in other camps. Other countries, namely Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the UK stated their willingness to accept a further 3000-4000 between them. Refugees would register their interest with UNHCR, who would then pass on their information to the foreign missions of the receiving countries to process the said applications. By the end of the first year, 2005, UNHCR reported that it had received applications from 4,651 families representing 24,054 persons, or around 24% of the total registered population of 101,912 persons

The resettlement programme soon expanded, and the US began accepting refugees from all the camps. The initial departures for the US hit a snag early on, and this is related to US legislation which banned entry to anyone who had given "material support" to an armed opposition group, and this was applied to anyone who had supported the Karen National Union. However, eventually a 'waiver' was passed and processing began in earnest. From 2007 the US began accepting refugees from more camps and with no ceiling figure.

As the programme got under way, 4,789 refugees left Thailand for resettlement in 2006, 14,636 in 2007, and 17,172 in 2008. These numbers continued to increase until 2009, after which they began to reduce. The reason being that with only those who were registered eligible for resettlement, the pool of those who could apply was diminishing. The majority of these departures – around three quarters – went to the United States. The following shows resettlement numbers by 2011.

Location	Australia	Canada	Denmark	Finland	Netherlands	Ireland	Japan	Norway	NZ	Sweden	UK	USA	Other	Total
Former urban	2		2	1				13		3		6		27
Mai Nai Soi	211	5		133					10			863		1,222
Mae Surin	157	1										159		317
Mae La Oon	45	34										1,937		2,016
Mae Ra Ma Luang	15	11			12					5		1,727		1,770
Mae La	185	17			5	1	18		39	3		1,813		2,081
Umpiem Mai	93	1							49			793		936
Nu Po	43								62			435		540
Don Yang	17				51	1						167		236
Tham Hin	7			13	12					6		79		117
2011	**775**	**69**	**2**	**147**	**80**	**2**	**18**	**13**	**160**	**17**	**0**	**7,979**	**0**	**9,262**
2010	857	339	8	123	50	0	27	50	5	80	4	9,538	26	11,107
2009	2,323	828	11	202	9	0	0	280	79	118	5	12,826	4	16,685
2008	1,562	637	1	283	144	0	0	70	24	141	29	14,280	1	17,172
2007	1,515	1,574	5	350	62	97	0	414	148	178	111	10,181	1	14,636
2006	734	756	5	208	115	0	0	324	176	348	81	2,164	2	4,913
Grand Total:	**7,766**	**4,203**	**32**	**1,313**	**460**	**99**	**45**	**1,151**	**592**	**882**	**230**	**56,968**	**34**	**73,775**

Source: International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Figures include family reunion and national migration

Resettlement Numbers by Camp, 2011 [12]

[12] Thailand Burma Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, July-December 2011. Page 9.

This new option for refugees offered hope for many people who, despite the various programmes and initiatives by refugee committees and supporting NGOs, were still living their lives in restricted camp environments, some for many years, even decades. It was a chance for a new life in a new country and many of the younger generation showed enthusiasm. Some of the older generation were split between wanting better lives for their children, while still feeling the attachment to the cultural, social, and environmental familiarity of being close to their homeland. It certainly created excitement, but also uncertainty.

However, a clear problem began to emerge that was negatively impacting the success of the community-based camp management model that had proven to be so successful since the very beginning. A disproportionate number of the most educated and skilled refugees, often those who played important roles in camp management or service delivery, were leaving for resettlement. Both UNHCR and CCDSPT conducted studies in 2007, finding that large numbers of teachers, health workers and camp management staff were leaving – up to 75% of skilled workers. Furthermore, many of the most educated or skilled refugees who may have replaced those who left were also registering their interest to leave. This was also a time of funding cuts, exacerbating the problem. Despite this, the refugee community showed resolve, ingenuity and resilience to maintain refugee-led camp-based organisation and management while TBC and other NGOs adapted to these new realities. Thus, the use of unregistered new arrivals as well as the opportunities for people who might not have otherwise participated in trainings or entered leadership positions meant that despite this huge predicament, the camp management structure did not collapse. After the departures peaked in 2008, the camp structure was consolidated and the refugee communities and TBC survived another crisis.

Figure 310: Administration Expenses Reported in Nine camps January to December 2008

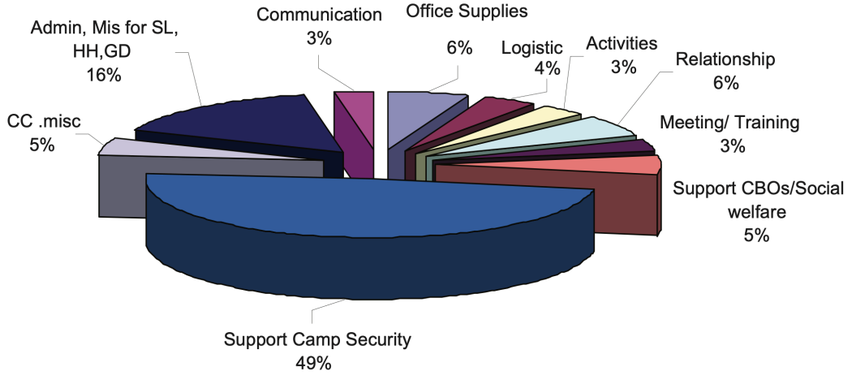
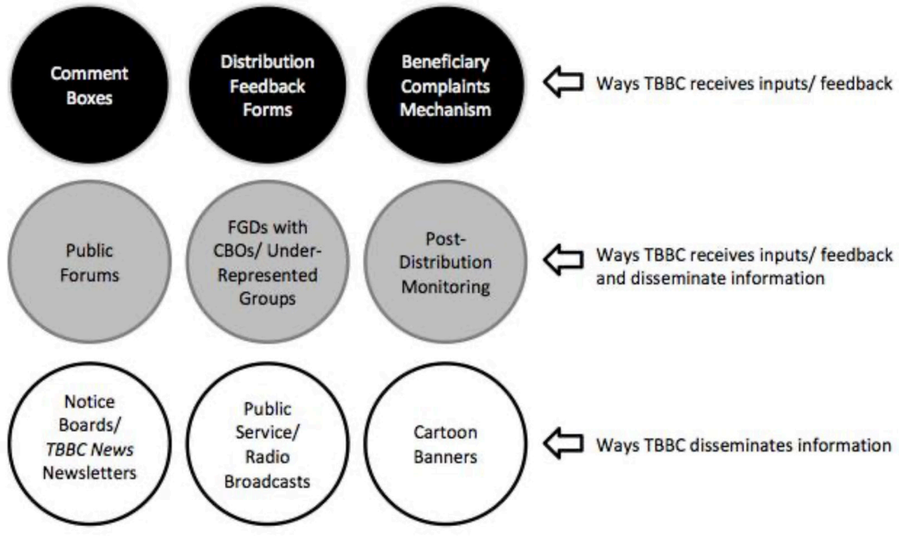


Fig. 3.23: TBBC's Accountability to Beneficiaries Toolbox



Integration?

Starting at a similar time (2005), another approach to the protracted nature of displacement began to emerge, and that was of advocating for refugees to be given the opportunity to contribute to the Thai economy through employment. This meant that income generation projects, skills trainings, and education opportunities were presented to the Thai government as a new approach that could provide a solution. UNHCR and CCSDPT wrote a letter to the Thai government in 2005, listing the advantages of such an approach, and drafted a comprehensive plan which included advocating for this policy change. The initial response from the Thai government was encouraging, and in 2007, TBC decided to make the promotion of livelihoods and income generation a core objective.

This was also accompanied by a shifting perspective among some donors, who understandably wanted a more sustainable solution for refugees after many years of providing funding. Yet the catch-22 is that this was reliant on the Thai government loosening its policy on allowing refugees to integrate locally. Hence, TBC was supportive of the advocacy towards policy change, while working with refugee communities to increase their potential to contribute towards this potential solution. Formalised as strategy in 2009, TBC "shifted from one of strengthening and sustaining services whilst waiting for change, to re-orientating all activities to promote change and durable solutions."[13]

[13] Thailand-Burma Border Consortium Six Monthly Report, January – June, 2009. Page 21.

In the initial stages of prioritising such income generation and trainings, the Community Agriculture and Nutrition Project (CAN) was one of the initial important refugee-led initiatives that TBC supported to develop skills. The weaving project led by women's organisations was also a part of this programmatic activity, as well as a vocational stove making project.

Yet the chances for integration into the Thai system and momentum for a Thai policy change that would enable integration remained limited due to concerns about creating a 'pull' factor as well as national security concerns. Despite this, the strategy of increasing capacity for self-reliance was seen as still relevant as it could help prepare refugees for resettlement to a third country or return to Burma, as well as any potential integration into Thai society. Therefore, from 2009, TBC massively increased its activities under this strategy, with a new programme to provide skills in entrepreneurship development and small grants for people to start micro enterprises in the camps. Ongoing mentorship, follow-up trainings, and building of financial capacity were very popular and businesses thrived in the camps. The injection of both capacity and financial resources resulted in an explosion of small businesses, while savings schemes and micro insurance cooperatives were established. The type of small businesses supported were varied and fascinating, from sewing and repairs, small shops, snack selling, to animal raising including pigs, goats, poultry and crickets. By the end of 2015, more than two thousand enterprises were being supported by TBC.

At the beginning, TBC generally did not provide shelter materials but in 1997 the Thai authorities prohibited the cutting down of new bamboo and by the early 2000s TBC began providing all shelter materials. Starting in 2010 TBC established a shelter programme where construction and repair skills were developed including the training of carpenters. This provided vocational training and income generation for refugees, but also experience in project management, as refugees themselves werethe ones identifying and repairing homes and public buildings. Section-based shelter working groups were established in each camp, self-managing the existing housing stock, assisting the shelter requirements of special needs households, monitoring and assessing needs, allocating materials, engaging in emergency responses for reconstruction, moving of households and dismantling empty houses. The leadership and taking of responsibility for camp shelter needs enabled leadership and decision-making experience and built confidence among refugees. It was also a sign of respect and trust between the refugees communities and TBC.

These projects, such as the expansions of the CAN programme, the entrepreneurship development support or the shelter project are all examples of TBC-supported, refugee-implemented programmes that prepare refugees for any future durable solution. While advocacy efforts, particularly by UNHCR and CCSDPT for refugee integration into Thai society did not gain enough momentum to be realistically possible, the type of skills training, income generation, agricultural training and production and building of capacity for entrepreneurship, found a new goal from 2011. For a few years after 2011 there was new hope that the skills learnt and the increasing capacity for self-reliance in terms of income generation of the refugee community were going to be applied in a return to a peaceful Burma/Myanmar that was going through the initial stages of a democratic transition.

CHAPTER FIVE :

2011-2018 A Time of Hope?

A New Myanmar?

Leading up to the years that were labelled the 'democratic transition' decade of 2011 to 2021, there was little expectation that the status quo – of entrenchment of the power of the Tatmadaw[14] of ongoing armed conflict, and the repression of human rights – would change in any meaningful way. Political developments leading up to 2011 included the promulgation of the 2008 Constitution that ostensibly allowed for democratic elections. Yet the public vote that approved this new structure of governance was implausibly supported by over 90% of the population during a referendum that was conducted in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Nargis – a disaster that killed upwards of 150,000 people and devastated large swathes of lower Myanmar. This 2008 Constitution reserves key ministry posts for military personnel, while guaranteeing 25% of parliamentary seats for the military. Furthermore, with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi still in prison and therefore not allowed to run in the election, the military-created, military-backed party – the USDP- took power in the new Parliament with an overwhelming victory in the 2010 election. Thus, while political changes were afoot, and there had to be hope, expectations were not particularly high that conflict would turn to peace and refugees could return home.

[14]The word Tatmadaw is a Burmese/Myanmar language word for the military.

And yet.

A series of surprising and dramatic developments in the coming years forged a sense of optimism. Indeed the atmosphere surrounding Burma/Myanmar for many observers from around 2011 to 2013 could be described as heady. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released, a huge controversial dam project that would have serious socio-economic and cultural impacts on local populations in Kachin State – the Myitsone Dam- was suspended, media restrictions was loosened, labour laws allowing the formation of trade unions were passed, and hundreds of political prisoners were released. In 2012 Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy that won a landslide in the 1990 elections, entered and won by-elections. Perhaps most importantly for the refugees, ceasefires with non-state ethnic armed organisations were signed throughout the country, including in January 2012 between the Burma/Myanmar government, the military, and the KNU. And while doubts over the reforms remained- including the outbreak of conflict with the Kachin Independence Army in the north from June 2011 and the enduring institutional role of the military in politics- the international community responded with gusto. Most economic sanctions were lifted, international organisations such as the World Bank reengaged, NGOs and UN agencies entered the country in their droves, and major international politicians paid visit to the country, meeting 'reformist' President, Thein Sein, and newly released democratic opposition leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

TBC's strategic direction and programmes reflected this change, but as with all TBC's programmes, the refugee communities and their representatives displayed agency and organisation in preparing themselves for a possible return, while also raising concerns. Moreover, the support for many years that TBC had provided the refugees and their leaders, in terms of trainings, capacity-building, and resources, had equipped them with the skills and experience to become efficient, successful, and respected leaders and prepare them for their role in the community if they were to relocate to southeastern Myanmar. The skills and coping strategies learnt over many years were hopefully going to be crucial in playing a constructive role in rebuilding their communities in the southeast.

Changes at TBC

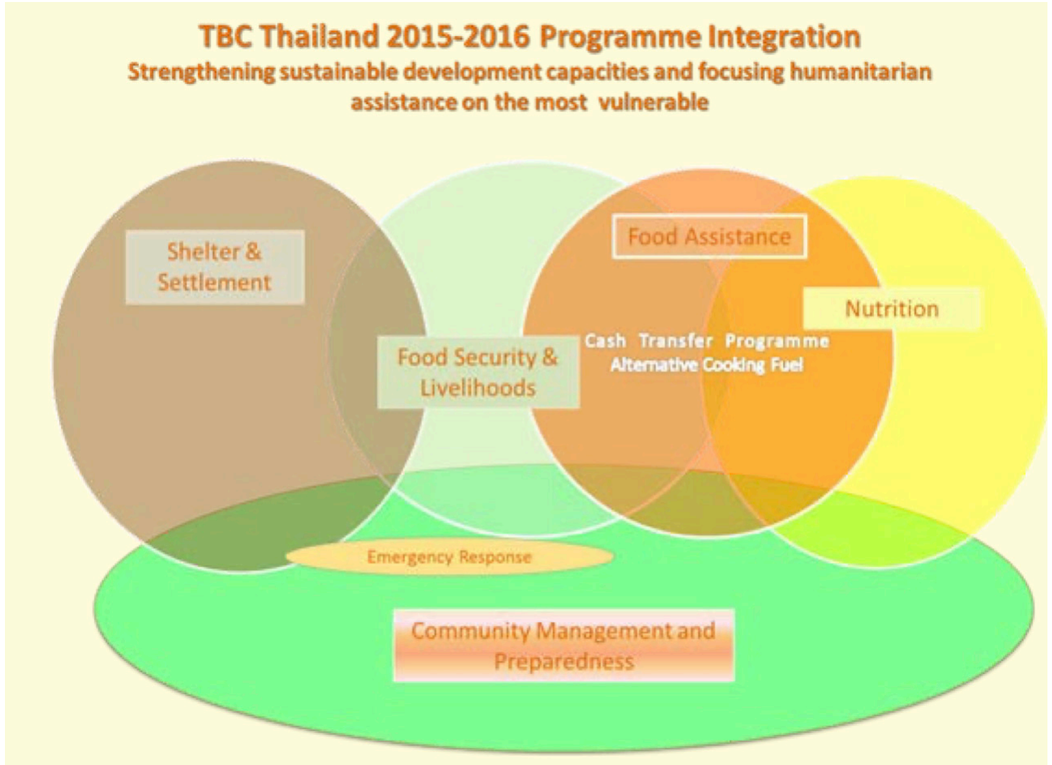
Starting in January 2013, a new Executive Director, Sally Thompson, took the responsibility of leading TBC through the new political context, replacing Jack Dunford. Jack had been with TBC from the very beginning in his position as Refugee Relief Coordinator with Church Christ Thailand - one of the founding members of the consortium. He served as the Chair of the Consortium of Christian Agencies – as TBC was then known, and was the de facto Director until 1997, when under the new formalised structure, he became the fulltime Director. Sally had been with TBC since 1991 until her retirement in 2022. During 2023 TBC had acting Executive Directors, and starting in 2024 Léon de Riedmatten became the fulltime Executive Director.

Preparing for Return

For TBC, and for the refugee communities then, the years from 2011 to 2015 were particularly hopeful. Indeed from 2012 refugee numbers began to reduce. TBC's 'verified caseload' fell by almost 9,000 people during 2012 to 128,199, the lowest number in a decade. They continued to lower and new arrivals noticeably dropped off, while a significant number of refugees spontaneously returned to Burma/Myanmar. It was thus decided early on that there needed to be a readiness for organised refugee return while at the same time it was acknowledged that the conditions for large-scale return were not yet right. The increasing militarisation by the Tatmadaw in southeastern Burma/Myanmar after the ceasefire as they sought to fortify existing bases and control roads were clear warning signs of the difficulties of moving from a ceasefire to a sustainable peace. But there existed, for the first time in nearly 30 years, an opportunity for many refugees to start thinking about home. A 2012 TBC report reflects the optimism of the time, "this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to end conflict, bring about reconciliation and allow Burma/ Myanmar to emerge from isolation. It is important to wholeheartedly support and encourage the change."[15]

[15]The Border Consortium Six Monthly Report, July–December, 2012. Page 2.

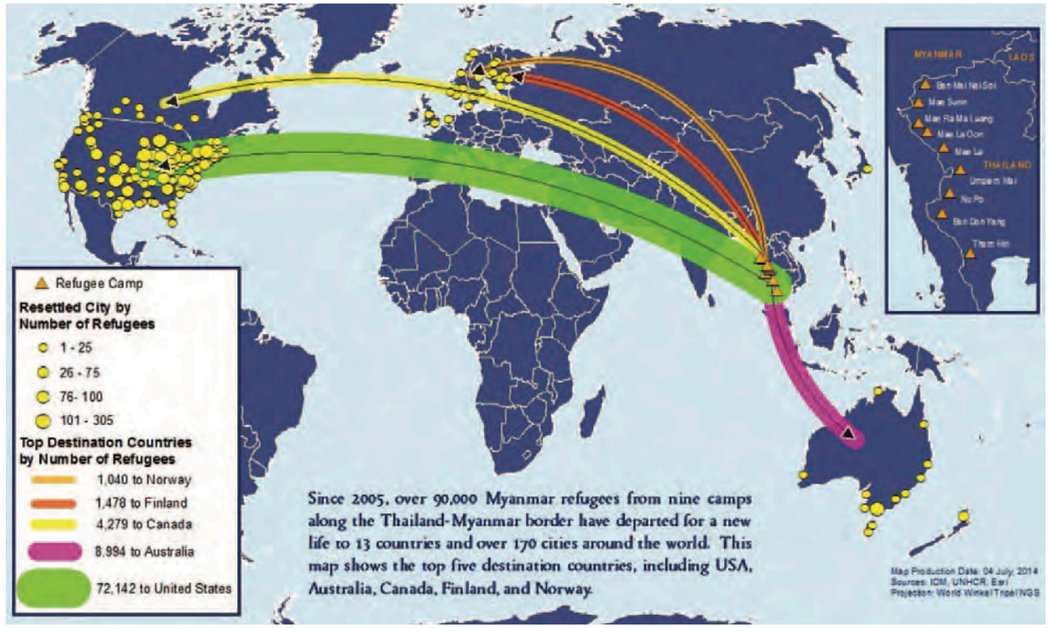
Early on, in 2012, the UNHCR drafted a framework, later to become a roadmap, for voluntary return of refugees from Thailand to Burma/Myanmar. However, first and foremost, the refugee community had to have access to information in order make informed decision on any return. TBC saw the absolute necessity in supporting refugees' work in gathering and assessing information, exploring options for the future, and making decisions and plans. This happened in various ways such as: support to the CCSDPT in setting up information centres; assisting the KRC and KnRC to develop return guidelines and to put operational plans for return in place; and organising refugee leaders to participate in 'go and see' visits to Burma/Myanmar to gather information on conditions inside the country and possible return sites. Meanwhile the refugee committees themselves established the Karenni Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction Working Group and the Committee for Refugee Return to lead efforts on preparedness and return planning.



Sally Thompson, former Executive Director: The Myanmar government wanted access to the resource-rich ethnic areas. The thrust of their peace negotiations was peace through economic development. But absolutely not because their way of economic development is seizing people's land and taking control of the resources. They wanted cooperation from ethnic armed groups and because we had the trust from ethnic organisations, that is what they wanted from us. We were a bridge.

Simultaneously, in the years leading up to 2013, resettlement was decreasing. With numbers dwindling, the US announced in 2013 the phasing out of the resettlement programme, although refugees still in the pipeline continued to leave while UNHCR continued to identify refugees for resettlement for reasons of family unit, family reunification, protection and medical cases.

Fig 1.2: Resettlement of Myanmar refugees by top five country destinations (2005-2014)



Third Country Resettlement Locations[16]

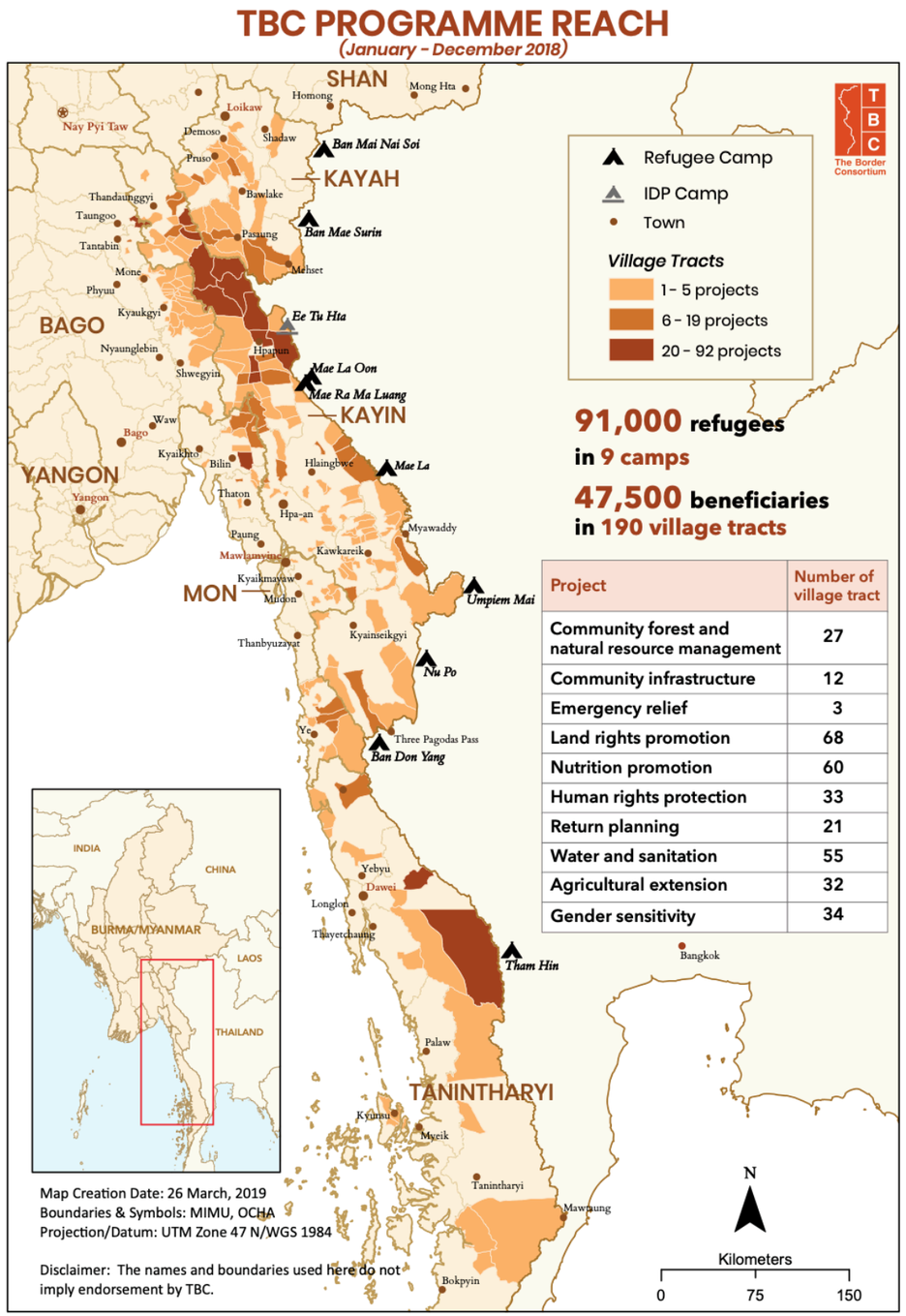
[16]The Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, January-June 2014. Page 10.

Yet it was not just on the Thai side of the border in the refugee camps where TBC felt it could make positive change. In order to support the broader peace process and positive political developments, TBC began to become more operational inside Burma/Myanmar. A first official meeting with the Government of Myanmar was held in Bangkok in early 2012, where TBC were thanked for the support provided to refugees over the years. Subsequently, TBC made an official visit to Yangon in 2012 and met with Minister Aung Min, who at the time was the leading figure from the Burma/Myanmar government in peace negotiations, to discuss establishing programmes inside the country.[17] The Karen Refugee Committee also met with the Karen State Minister of the Burma/Myanmar government in 2014. Subsequently TBC supported many CBO-led several programmes to aid in the recovery of conflict-affected communities in southeastern Burma/Myanmar in light of possible return of refugees to these areas. TBC sub-offices in Mawlamyine in Mon State and Loikaw in Kayah State were opened in 2014.

Go-and-see visit to Hpa An District Photo credit: TBC

Sally Thompson, former Executive Director : At the time of the peace process, we were very wary. We asked our partners whether we should go in and if they had said no we wouldn't have gone in, but they said yes because they said 'we know you, we trust you and you share information.' If we had a presence in Yangon there would be information coming out from the dialogues happening there. So that is why we went in. But for our partners it was all about keeping one foot in Thailand. You have to keep the back door open because there is no certainty of anything in Myanmar at all. You have to keep that option open whereas the donors were pushing partners to move to Myanmar.

[17]A Memorandum of Understanding was agreed in principle in 2016 and effective from 2017, with TBC registered under Burma/Myanmar's Ministry of Home Affairs. It expired in December 2022 and has not been renewed.



Project	Number of village tract
Community forest and natural resource management	27
Community infrastructure	12
Emergency relief	3
Land rights promotion	68
Nutrition promotion	60
Human rights protection	33
Return planning	21
Water and sanitation	55
Agricultural extension	32
Gender sensitivity	34

The type of activities supported were a wide range of projects including but not limited to:

Strengthening land tenure in collaboration with the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) through advocacy for policy change, raising awareness on land rights for villagers and registering land through customary and formal systems;

Supporting community driven development via the Tenasserim River and Indigenous People's Network for community-based natural resource management, empowering local communities and protecting the environment;

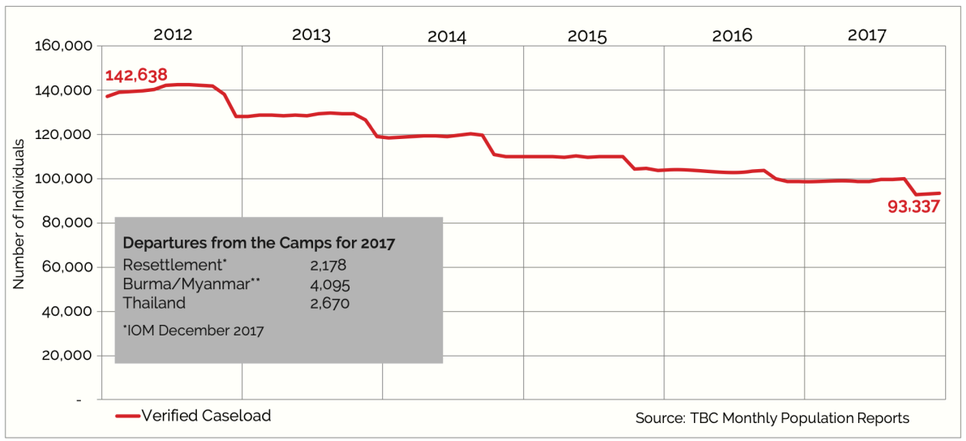
Cash transfers for vulnerable individuals for food and other essentials via the Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD), the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen Persons, the Mon Relief and Development Committee, and Karenni Social Welfare and Development Centre to combat chronic poverty in southeastern Burma/Myanmar;

Supporting workshops on community protection strategies conducted by the Karen Human Rights Group that provide information for villagers about existing national laws and mechanisms for recourse to justice as well as information on international human rights standards;

Enhancing agricultural productivity through landscaping abandoned fields, repairing irrigation systems and farmer field schools focusing on composting, soil conservation, and organic gardening in partnership with KESAN, KORD, the Shan State Development Foundation (SSDF), and Mawduklarmae Social Development Association (MSDA);

Promoting women's health via the KnWO and a maternal and child health programme of KWO.

Figure 1.1 Camp Population 2012 - 2017



[18] Thailand Border Consortium Six Monthly Report, January-June, 2012. Page 20.

Additionally, keen to promote the nascent peace process – sustainable peace being an essential condition for a safe and dignified return for refugees – TBC supported a number of peacebuilding activities. This includes logistical support for consultations with community-based organisations from conflictaffected areas, technical support to the various components of the official peace process architecture such as the Union Peace Conference and the Joint Monitoring Committee, facilitating a workshop on lessons learned from community-based ceasefire monitoring in the Philippines for Karenni civil society and the KNPP, and supporting the participation of border-based CSOs in national and state-based forums, specifically those related to ceasefire and political dialogue processes. TBC also facilitated meetings between ethnic leaders and the international community so that "diplomats and Inter national Organisations could start talking with, rather than just talking about, non-state armed groups."[18]

Funding Reductions and joint TBC-Refugee Solutions

Paradoxically, the positive momentum for change did have negative impacts on the lives of refugees. Many donors sought to establish a foothold inside the country and, understandably, support the tentative changes towards democracy. However, this meant that refugee camps in Thailand were pushed down the priority list and finding adequate funding became a major problem for TBC. Indeed, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, during her visit to Mae La Camp in 2012 warned against fatigue and urged donors to continue to show compassion and support refugees until they are able to return home. Yet as massive funding cuts began to take hold, this reduced the ability of TBC to support the refugee camps and cuts had to be made in various aspects of programming. Internal restructuring from 2014 meant that staffing numbers decreased at all levels by up to 20%. In 2017 TBC had to end food support to the five Karen and Shan camps that were located adjacent to Thailand inside Burma/ Myanmar.

Ner Kaw Htoo, Chairperson of the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC): For KnRC, the biggest challenge we experience is that since the donors decreased the support and rations, people have to go outside of the camp to make money for their family. When they go to make money outside, they get arrested by the police because actually refugees are not allowed to go outside of the camp. As KnRC, we try to conduct advocacy with the Thai government and local authorities. We have been doing this for a long time but the situation remains unchanged. They don't allow refugees to go outside the camp officially. Also while TBC is the main organisation that helps us with the camp management, it is not enough for us in order to provide full support.

[18] Thailand Border Consortium Six Monthly Report, January-June, 2012. Page 20.

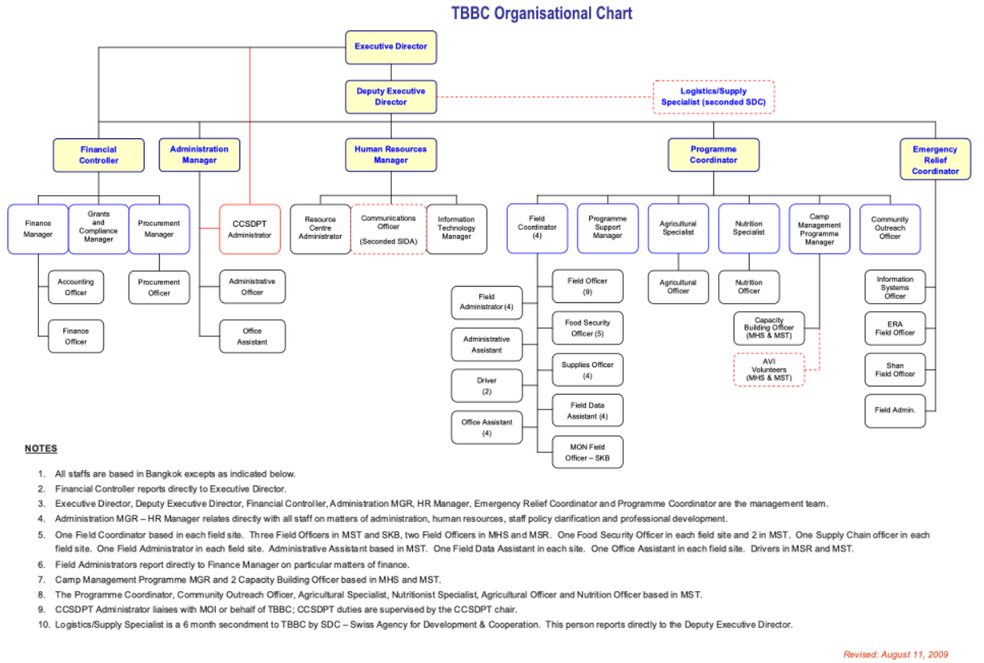
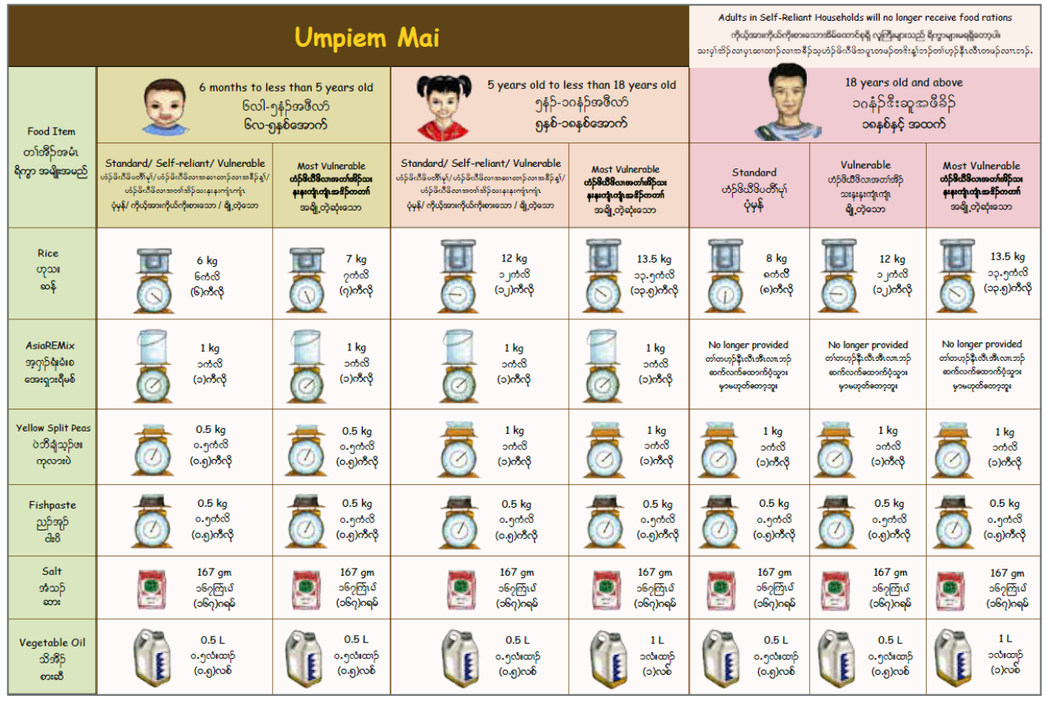


Figure 3.15 TBBC Organisational Chart, June 2009

Sally Thompson on funding cuts: "Over 2013 TBC's refugee programmes have transitioned to a needs-based system. While driven largely by funding cuts, these changes also recognised the opportunity to give refugees a more direct role in managing their limited resources. Rather than implement this administratively, TBC did what we do best: we worked with the community, on the ground, organising community-based outreach teams to go door to door, talking with residents, faith leaders and camp stipend workers, answering questions, addressing anxieties and reassuring the community that these changes were not intended to encourage a premature return to Burma/Myanmar."

[19] The Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, July-December 2013. Page 3.



Banners detailing new ration levels in Umpiem Mai

Umpiem Mai Camp Banner[20]

One of the biggest changes was the reduction of food rations for refugees. Starting in 2013, a reduction in the standard monthly ration alongside the introduction of need-based ration categories, which saw ration levels maintained for children, vulnerable households, and increases in monthly rice rations for households deemed “most vulnerable,” was established. This community-managed targeting (CMT) system- the first of its kind in Asia- recognised that over the years refugees had developed their own coping strategies and some, albeit a very small number (495 out of 118,917 refugees across the nine camps in 2014), were able to be self-reliant. It was thus essential that those most vulnerable and who were not self-reliant were still receiving the necessary rations. The introduction of this CMT programme and its relative success was not possible without the engagement of refugee communities in defining the criteria for ration allocation and classification of what constitutes vulnerable. And while reducing rations amidst strained circumstances is not an inherent good, the CMT programme did have some benefits. It gave a more direct role in the management of targeted food needs in the hands of the refugees themselves while also drawing attention to the specific needs of the most vulnerable refugees living in the camps.

[20] The Border Consortium, Six Monthly Report, July-December 2013. Page 30.

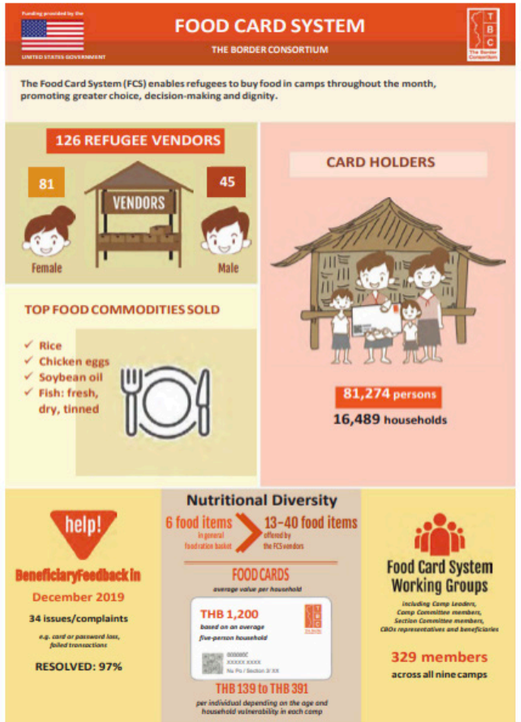
It was of course not without problems and a reduction in support is inevitably a difficult process. For example, the reduction in food did catalyse anxiety in the camps that refugees would be forced to return to Burma/ Myanmar, even if they felt the time was not yet right. There were concerns that creating categories for food assistance would create divisions between groups of refugees, while those who earned a stipend as camp workers, and thus deemed self-reliant, would perhaps have less motivation to work as it ultimately meant that they would have their food ration reduced. This actually resulted in two protests in Nu Po Camp in 2014, by teachers and medical staff. TBC worked hard with refugee and camp committees to ensure transparent communications, to supplement rations where it was felt to be an unfair reduction, and establishing an appeal process which was vital in providing a channel to address grievances. Furthermore, working with and giving as much support as possible to the camp committees and the CMT teams in the camps was essential as refugees look up to them when needing help to deal with their various difficulties faced in camp life. One example of this is, following the teacher strike event and protest, the Nu Po Camp Committee decided to address the threat to discontinued education to children by providing extra rice to the teachers from their own administrative budget, thus speedily addressing an emergency situation. Indeed, in 2015, when further cuts to funding were made, the refugee-managed CMT was prepared for the necessary adjustments and resolution.

TBC Food Basket							
	6 Months to under 5 years		5 Years to 17 years		Adult		
Food Item	Self-reliant/ Standard/ Vulnerable	Most vulnerable	Self-reliant/ Standard/ Vulnerable	Most vulnerable	Standard	Vulnerable	Most vulnerable
Rice	6 kg	7 kg	11 kg	13.5 kg	9 kg	11 kg	13.5 kg
Vegetable Oil	0.5 L		0.5 L	1 L	0.5 L	0.5 L	1 L
Yellow Split Peas	0.5 kg		1 kg		1 kg		
Yellow Split Peas (No Fishpaste)	0.6 kg		1.2 kg		1.2 kg		
Fishpaste	0.5 kg		0.5 kg		0.5 kg		
AsiaREMix	1 kg		1 kg		0 kg		
Iodized Salt	167 g		167 g		167 g		
Charcoal	15kg 1st person/ +5kg per each additional person in household						

Adults in Self-Reliant households no longer receive food rations, but are still entitled to a charcoal ration as part of the household

TBC Food Basket Details[21]

[21] The Border Consortium, Annual Report, 2016. Page 9.



Food Card System Information[22]

In 2016 the provision of food rations entered a new phase with the piloting of a Food Card System in Tham Hin and Nu Po Camps. Under this system refugees were provided e-vouchers, now food cards, which give households the opportunity to buy food from designated stores, primarily run by other refugees, within camp markets, giving them more control and the ability to expand their food choices. The Food Card System also introduced refugees to buying goods and services in the modern digital world. The CMT committees, which are established in each camp, determines the amount food card support offered to each household. The pilot was successful and was extended to all the camps in 2019. Not only does the Food Card System give refugees experience in digital technology, but the dignity of having choice and agency to make decisions that work best for each household, buying at a time that is convenient from a larger selection of items and based on individual preferences fits the ethos of TBC and the community-management of the camps. Quarterly surveys show that refugees use the card to buy more expensive items such as rice and cooking oil, and then supplement this with home grown vegetables from community or home gardens. An external evaluation found that it had diversified options for livelihoods, improved diet diversity and supported agriculture productivity.

[22]The Border Consortium, Annual Report, 2019. Page 29.

Facilitated Refugee Returns via UNHCR

In 2016 the first facilitated returns of refugees – 71 people – occurred, organised through the UNHCR's voluntary return process via an agreement between the governments of Burma/Myanmar and Thailand. The World Food Programme provided food for three months and transportation on the Burma/Myanmar side, the UNHCR provided some start-up costs, and the two governments helped with transport. However, problems amid this process, including unaffordable accommodation in Yangon, lack of confidentiality resulting in intense media attention, and the refugee and camp committees being sidelined meant it was not as successful as hoped. The level of support was subsequently increased and in 2018, 93 refugees returned through this process and a further 875 returned in 2019. By the time the UNHCR-facilitated return process was curtailed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, just over 1,000 refugees had participated. What was more common, however, was the self-organised returns of refugees, who made the decisions and left by themselves. During these transition years a few thousand returned each year, although less than was expected by planning agencies and donors. This reflected the fragility of the ceasefires in the southeast, the sporadic outbreaks of armed conflict, and the ongoing militarisation by, predominantly, the Tatmadaw.

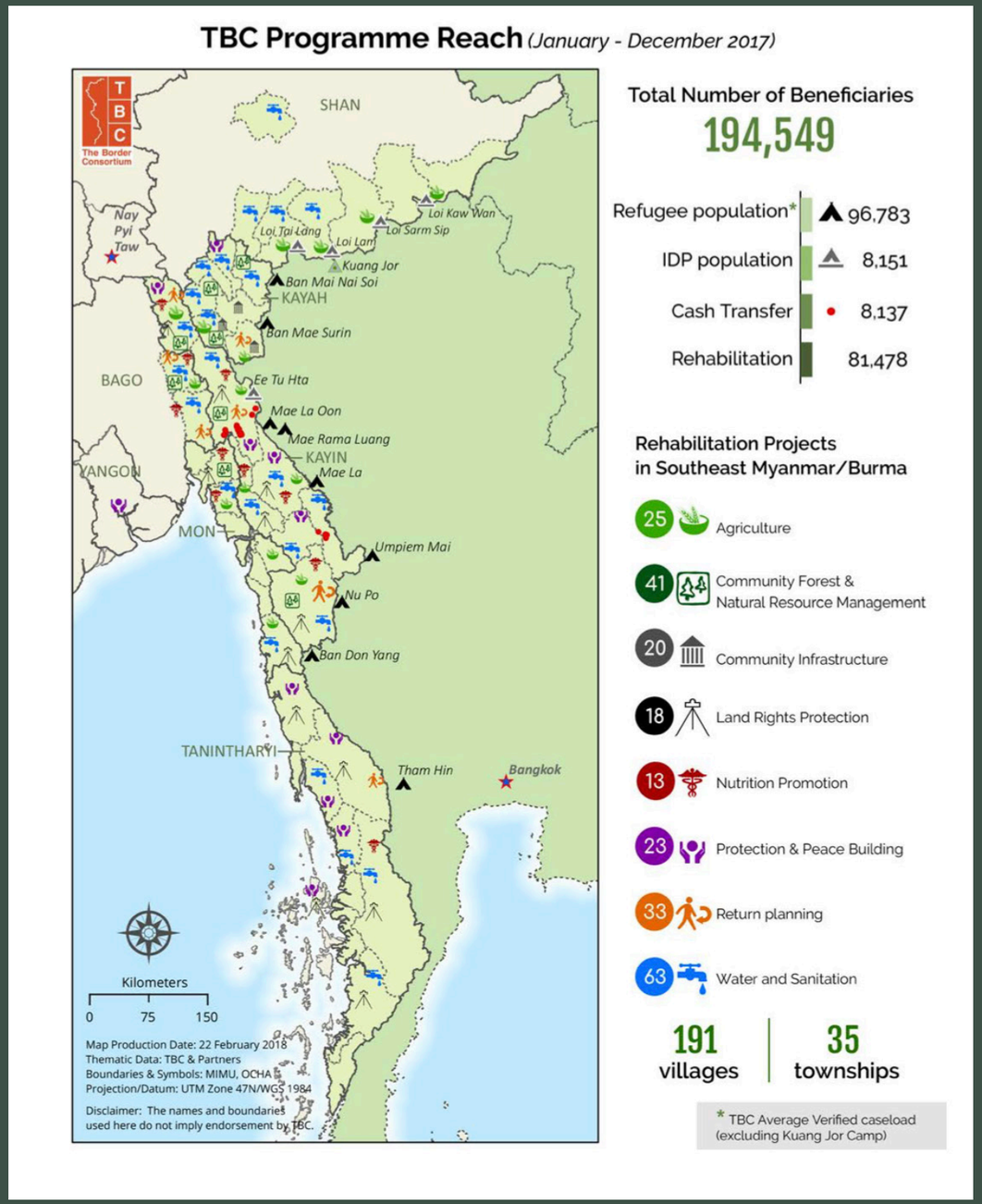
Hopes Dashed

After the initial years of optimism, mixed signals from home revealed the fractured nature of political change in Burma/Myanmar. There were undoubtedly positive developments such as, in 2015, the first, mostly free and fair election in 25 years, which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party won by a landslide. Peace negotiations continued and in 2015, the nationwide ceasefire agreement was signed which reinforced the already existing bilateral ceasefires with, among others, the KNU. International engagement also increased for a while. However, warning signs were there, particularly the spread of anti-Muslim violence in central parts of Burma/Myanmar, growing religious intolerance catalysed by an extremist nationalist Buddhist movement, and ongoing armed conflict in Kachin and Shan States. Importantly for many of the refugees who fled from southeastern Burma/Myanmar, increasing militarisation was putting obstacles in the way of return.
Indeed, research conducted by TBC published in 2014 documented similar or increased troop strength for both Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups across 70% of village tracts in 2014 compared to before the bilateral ceasefire agreements. Furthermore, while forced labour and active armed conflict had decreased, land grabbing and other development-induced human rights violations were becoming more widespread.

Agricultural Support in Potential Return Villages

The ceasefires were simply not turning into a more sustainable peace. Yet probably the most dramatic development was the extreme violence committed by the Tatmadaw against the Muslim minority Rohingya group in Rakhine State, western Myanmar in 2016 and 2017. The 2017 violence resulted in over 700,000 Rohingya fleeing into Bangladesh in what the UN at the time described as a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing.' In 2018, the International Criminal Court announced that crimes against humanity would be investigated and a case was opened at the International Court of Justice. A 2018 report by the UN-established Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar concluded with the recommendation for Burma/Myanmar's top military generals to be investigated for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. After 2017, international diplomatic relations with the Burma/Myanmar government cooled, the media narrative began to shift towards some of the deep-seated and unaddressed problems in the country, and hope for a democratic transition was stalling. For south-eastern Burma/Myanmar, deterioration in relations with KNU due to the Tatmadaw's militarisation and ceasefire violations, as well as the lack of progress in the national peace process, led a breakdown of the ceasefire in October 2018, with the KNU suspending formal dialogue. For refugees, this ultimately meant that prospects of return diminished. Research that TBC conducted with the Geneva-based International Displacement Monitoring Centre concluded in 2019 that "donor expectations regarding refugee return have not been met and recommended adjustments in strategic thinking to strengthen responses along the entire displacement continuum."[23]

[23] The Border Consortium Annual Report, 2019. Page 22.



CHAPTER SIX :

The Two Cs – COVID and Coup

Very few people, whether refugees or TBC, could have predicted the dramatic events of 2020-2021, both globally and within Myanmar.

Preparing for a Pandemic

Back in 2009, in a context of concerns around a possible influenza pandemic, TBC alongside CCSDPT, UN agencies and Thai government agencies, drew up a pandemic preparedness plan that included stockpiling supplies, and basic health and safety training for staff if a pandemic did indeed break out.

When thinking about the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2019/2020, a situation far worse than the 2009 planning anticipated, how do refugee camps, where thousands of people living in close quarters with movements restricted, deal with the rapid spread of the fatal virus? In the refugee camps in Thailand, it was through adaption, cooperation, self-reliance, and mutual trust and learning, principles that have underwritten the history of camp management and organisation since 1984.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly throughout the world, Thailand declared a state of emergency in 2020, inter-provincial travel was largely prevented, entry into Thailand's borders was heavily restricted and with quarantine for new arrivals set up, shops, bars and entertainment businesses were closed, and face masks became mandatory. Thailand's initial strict response meant that in 2020, the rate of COVID-19 infection was comparatively low. Meanwhile, the UNHCR stopped the voluntary repatriation process from February 2020.

TBC, as with many organisations in all sectors throughout the world, switched to remote communications, ensuring that information flows and exchange with camp-based staff were timely and accurate. Additional measures that TBC employed included the suspension of mass gatherings, non-essential travel to camps halted, personal protective equipment distributed, hand-washing and hygiene stations set up in all camps, quarantine centres established, and information about the pandemic and prevention measures disseminated with local partners. Strict enforcement of movement of refugees outside the camp by the Thai government meant that income generation activities were impacted. This affected the ability of many households to acquire the adequate food amounts and anxiety within the camps increased. In response, TBC increased the value of the food car so that every household was receiving the level of those in the 'Most Vulnerable' category. Furthermore, the switch to remote communications, and the decreased physical presence of TBC staff meant that camp committees took even greater responsibility and ownership over the management of assistance. Due to the swift response and measures taken together with the refugee and camp committees, only one case was discovered in the refugee camps in 2020, a mass outbreak was initially avoided, and core humanitarian assistance continued to be delivered.

Inside Myanmar, the resilience of local communities, especially ethnic service providers and ethnic armed organisations was paramount to the pandemic response, as decades of underfunded healthcare and a legacy of armed conflict meant that Myanmar state provision was not going to meet the local needs. Thus, ethnic service providers established and operated screening checkpoints and enforced community-based quarantines despite increasing militarisation from the Tatmadaw. For TBC, the transition to online meetings and trainings meant that programmes stayed on track. Furthermore, to support local response to the pandemic inside Myanmar, TBC used a four pronged strategy: risk prevention communication and community engagement; distribution of PPE; supporting CSOs who worked at screening points; and more targeted distribution of food assistance and cash transfers.

In 2021, however, the preparedness that camp committees and TBC had been working together on became very much in need. A rise in COVID infections in Thailand that began in April 2021 and peaked in August spread to the camps, and eight camps experienced such an outbreak, with over 3,000 cases recorded and 36 deaths by the end of 2021. Yet throughout the 2nd half of the year, the vaccination programme began to reach refugees and nearly one quarter had received at least one shot by the end of 2021. TBC had to initially work hard to overcome some vaccine hesitancy, with videos of senior camp leaders receiving their vaccination and combatting misinformation shown, while camp information teams also disseminated accurate information and combatted falsehoods.

Sally Thompson, former Executive Director: When the COVID-19 pandemic happened, in the refugee camps, we were not able to go there. We had to step back, and it was our local partners that continued on with the programme. That was a physical demonstration of what those partnerships meant and where the relationship and trust was. It was built on something that was solid. They had the capability, but still needed core support to build their own capacity. We stepped back and let them get on with it. I think the COVID-19 response was a testament to our partners and working through them.

Following worldwide trends, Thailand gradually reduced COVID restrictions throughout 2022, and the state of emergency was lifted, international travel resumed and mask-wearing was no longer mandatory. For refugees, they were better able to seek local employment opportunities outside the camps although new arrivals were still not technically allowed. TBC continued to support vaccinations in camps. And although in-person meetings began to be more possible, the benefits of remote communication, such as increased attendance resulting in more inclusive participation from different groups, means that some of these measures were adopted on a more permanent basis.

Unlike many environments in the world, however, the anxiety, concerns, and changes in day-to-day life that the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed was compounded by a sudden and violent political upheaval across the border in Myanmar.

Coup

February 1st, 2021 is a day that has changed Myanmar forever. Alleging election fraud after the NLD won its second landslide election in November 2020, and just as the government was about to take office, the Tatmadaw staged a coup. Tanks were on the street, State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint and many other NLD MPs, ministers, and political figures were arrested, and internet was cut. Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces, formed the military's new body, the State Administration Council, to attempt to govern the country.

The response from the people of Myanmar was an emphatic 'no!'. Huge street demonstrations throughout the country, the formation of a mass Civil Disobedience Movement in which public and private sectorworkers went on strike, boycotts of products produced by military conglomerates, refusal to pay bills and other forms of protest and non-cooperation proliferated. The response of the newly formed SAC to this nationwide resistance to the coup was violent and brutal. Mass arrests, massacres in the streets, internet cuts, and instigation of violence by released prisoners, forced many protesters to take refuge in ethnic armed organisations administrative areas. A coalition of civil society organisations, EAOs, and political parties formed a political alliance – the National Unity Consultative Council, which in turn formed the National Unity Government, consisting of former NLD members and ethnic leaders.

Armed conflict dramatically increased, both with long-established EAOs such as the KNU, and also newly formed people's defence forces (PDFs) that sprung up in response to the coup. SAC attacks in the southeast, including the use of heavy artillery and airstrikes were particularly fierce, targeting groups opposing the coup and displacing 200,000 by the end of 2021. One particular offensive against Lay Kay Kaw in December 2021 along the Thailand border near Mae Sot, which was supposed to be a site for internally displaced persons to return to, decimated the town, and caused thousands to flee over to Thailand. Restrictions by the Thai government meant that access was only allowed for Thai organisations. TBC managed to leverage local networks to provide emergency support but after six weeks, these refugees were sent back to Myanmar.

As the junta ramped up its attacks throughout the country, the Delta variant of COVID-19 tore through the country in the rainy season months of 2021. The dysfunction of the health services that the coup caused meant that vaccines, testing, and treatment was decimated. Oxygen was being hoarded by the junta for SAC personnel, medical workers arrested for supporting the CDM, and the junta refused to allow non-state medical services such as private clinics and INGOs to operate. Ethnic health service providers did their best to fill the gap but still, thousands were dying, crematoriums were full and an extreme public health emergency was compounding the extreme violence faced by people throughout the country.

Yet the resistance in Myanmar has continued undeterred. In fact the governance abilities, as well as territories controlled, has expanded and continues to expand. The SAC has resorted increasingly to more violent measures, with airstrikes particularly prevalent as the junta faces losses on the ground, defections, and low morale. In fact, several airstrikes and heavy artillery attacks landed on Thai soil in 2022, and the Myanmar Air Force violated Thai airspace.

Inside Myanmar, TBC continues to provide emergency relief in the form of cash transfers, food aid, non-food items and/or medical treatment, which in 2022 was coordinated for 260,000 civilians. This low-profile, community-driven response, has been supported via a network of over 30 civil society organisations (CSOs) and ethnic service providers across southeastern Myanmar. Indeed, informal, local, cross-border and ethnic service providers that TBC partners with are able to provide support to far more IDPs than the formal humanitarian architecture that goes through SAC controlled areas.

For refugees and the assistance programme, uncertainty prevails. The coup and subsequent violence means that prospects for return, already dimming by 2020, have become extremely low, at least in the short-term. Plans for return including the UNHCR-facilitated voluntarily return programme have been suspended indefinitely, as have 'go and see' visits. The sounds of airstrikes and heavy artillery are heard from the border and refugee camps, underscoring the dramatic escalation of violence inside the country since February 2021, and the lack of immediate hope for return.

Conclusion

This report has been about the past 40 years, of TBC working together with refugees and their representatives, to provide an assistance programme that has broadened, modernised, adapted and endured despite immense challenges. Yet the future remains more uncertain now than it ever has in the entire history of this partnership. It is a fools game to predict what will happen for these refugees, whether they will be able to return to their homeland in the coming years or if other durable solutions become more feasible. What can be said is that TBC's work with displaced communities has prepared the consortium for what is to come. The coup and subsequent violence has shown how the ethnic service providers in the southeast of the country that TBC has supported for many years were best placed to provide essential services for the massively increasing numbers of displaced and those in humanitarian need. The long-standing relationships that TBC has with communities and community organisations based on trust and cooperation is essential to the short and medium term provision of humanitarian assistance. This is especially so given the continuing loss of territory and control that the junta has in these areas. Furthermore, as these local actors such as CSOs and EAOs, as well as the newly formed governance entities like the NUG, provide the services, administration and governance that the SAC cannot, they are practicing a form of self-determination that is the foundation for a peaceful Myanmar and the building of a federal democracy. This, ultimately, is the condition for the safe and dignified return of refugees.

That the current situation will translate into a such a sustainable peace and the end to violence is the optimistic version that TBC hopes to see. Preparing the ground for this vision and continuing the model of self-reliance for refugees will be TBC's approach going forward. However, the slightly more pessimistic version, where refugees in the camps in Thailand continue to have humanitarian needs, where safe and dignified return is not feasible, and preparation for other durable solutions such as resettlement to a third country or integration into Thailand, are also real possibilities. In both of these futures TBC will continue to prioritise the humanitarian imperative, reinforce resilience and recovery, promote and protect and safer futures and strengthen local governance – in partnership with the refugees themselves.

Donors have been supporting refugees in the Thai camps for forty years, and the Thai government has simultaneously hosted these communities with generosity for these same four decades. While there have been ups and downs along the way, there is unfortunately a continued need for this support. However, this support is not without return. Not only have there been successes in terms of the incredible resiliency and organisation that refugees have shown, but they are well prepared to contribute to society. Indeed refugees have been doing so despite their predicament, whether those who resettled overseas, those few who did return to Myanmar and work among their communities, or the joint projects between refugees and local Thai villages.

The situation in Myanmar is uncertain, violent, and riddled with anxiety. Yet there is a hope in the country, and there must be hope for a dignified and durable solution for these refugee communities. The goodwill and capacity built over forty years is crucial to maintain and to protect what is a unique model of refugee organisation in order to contribute for any future for refugee communities. It is imperative for those who have been supporting these vibrant communities to continue to support the self-reliance, social cohesion, diversity and organisation that can be part of the building of a new Myanmar, or adding value, diversity and social capital to where the refugees ultimately end up. The support from donors and the Thai government has been an investment in humanity and in this time of hope for a better future coupled with anxiety about the current situation, TBC is prepared and will continue to work with the same principles that began forty years ago, in 1984.