

„Good Friends“ in difficult times.

The Kalyana Mitta Foundation as CPS partner in Myanmar.

By Wolfgang Labuhn

When KURVE Wustrow sent Anna-Lena Schulz to Myanmar in 2015 within the CPS program the country was still enjoying a fresh start. In 2011 after 23 years of military rule the junta had handed over power to new constitutional institutions. Opening up the country politically and economically had prompted the EU and the US to lift most of the sanctions imposed on the military regime. Foreign dignities queued up in the capital Nay Pyi Taw, and even US president Barack Obama paid a visit in 2012. The general euphoria led to a landslide victory of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) in the elections on 8th November 2015. Having been repressed by the military rulers for decades the party now won 80 percent of the seats in the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. In March 2016 the NDL took over government although the NLD leader and Nobel Peace Price Winner Aung San Suu Kyi could not become president for constitutional reasons. However, as “State Counsellor” and Foreign Secretary she still determined government policy which formally lay in the hands of President U Htin Kyaw. The path to a genuine parliamentary democracy seemed to be irreversible. It was a good moment to contribute to the building of a new civil society in the country formerly known as Burma with peace education projects and educational advocacy.

But starting her job as CPS adviser of the Kalyana Mitta Foundation (KMF) turned out to be difficult for CPS expert Anna-Lena Schulz. The change of government had done nothing to change the rigid control of the state school system by the Ministry of Education which did not welcome outside ideas like the CPS project “Education for Peace”. Although education is highly regarded in mainly Buddhist Myanmar traditional frontal teaching to classes with up to 100 children is common practice. Critical questions by pupils are met with caning. Anna-Lena Schulz noticed a general “culture of violence” at the schools which nobody seemed interested in changing. Unsurprisingly, neither schools nor individual teachers were willing to take up KMF’s offers of peace education. State universities presented a similar picture. Students merely wrote down what lecturers told them and prepared themselves for their next exam by rote learning. There was neither any critical discussion of the knowledge passed on to them nor the willingness to show any individual initiative. It was an altogether bad starting ground from which to build up democratic structures after the long time of military rule.

But as the CPS’s local partner organisation the Kalyana Mitta Foundation could build on appropriate experiences. As early as 2008 the KMF had been set up as an informal Buddhist youth organisation. Originally a grass roots organisation, KMF received its official NGO registration in 2013 during the shift from military rule to civil government. KMF now receives financial and human resources support from various European partner organisations with KURVE Wustrow being one of them. In English “Kalyana mitta” means “good friends”. Together with a group of like-minded people its present director Bo Bo Lwin founded the organisation in the tradition of socially engaged Buddhists. Before Bo Bo Lwin had studied Agricultural Sciences at Bangkok University. He wrote a master thesis on the management of natural resources.

When in 2007 Buddhist monks led demonstrations against the policies of the military government (the so-called “saffron revolution”) the public protest had been bloodily squashed by the regime. However, soon after the military rulers decided to return step by step to democracy. In 2008 a new constitution was adopted accordingly. It seemed to be an opportune moment to encourage young Buddhists to social engagement, and to provide them with the necessary skills for the hoped-for change of society in the country. As workshops in Buddhist temples shortly after suppressing the “saffron revolution” proved to be an altogether too sensitive issue Bo Bo Lwin and his friends chose Christian churches as venues for private training courses although constant observation by state security could not be avoided. Ten years ago he could never have met a foreigner at a café says Bo Bo Lwin at the beginning of October in Berlin when he and Anna-Lena Schulz talk about their joint work. Bo Bo Lwin remembers a trip by members of a KMF course to Kichan in northern Myanmar to study rural development projects like micro credit unions and communal forests. The group was closely watched by the police who questioned the participants for hours, however without arresting anybody. KMF’s program has now resulted in 34 Alumni Core Groups with some 1,500 youths. They engage in peace work, conflict management, interfaith dialogue, environmental conservation, and gender equality generally aiming at public awakening. And while Myanmar is still a mainly agrarian country, a special emphasis is put on programs for young farmers to raise their awareness for eco-friendly farming practices. KMF has offices in Yangon (formerly: Rangoon), Loikaw and at Lake Inle. According to Bo Bo Lwin the youth group at Lake Inle alone counts some 100 members.

The KMF-alumni network proved to be especially useful when the CPS was looking for partners outside the school system for peace education projects and advocacy. KMF alumni established the contact with Salaing University of Education near Mandalay. The Salaing University of Education is one of only two universities in Myanmar providing training for high school teachers. The Dean of Salaing University took personal responsibility for allowing peace education projects at his college if students wished to be offered this program. Anna-Lena Schulz noticed that students at the Salaing University were highly interested in social change and in a changed educational system, too but did not know where to start. Therefore the CPS program had to start more or less from scratch. Usually at weekends basic concepts like peace, violence, and conflict were discussed during small training units. The aim was to raise awareness among the mainly quite young students for identity and discrimination, a critical look at the media, gender questions and especially the many ethnic minorities in Myanmar and resulting traumata. For most of the teachers-to-be are Bamar-Buddhists who constitute the majority of the population in the country. After five years of training the Ministry of Education often sends them to regions where Burmese is not the main language and Buddhism not the main religion. At university the students are not prepared for that kind of situation nor are they taught practical teaching skills. When they start a job after college they have to deal with frontal teaching and corporal punishment by themselves. Advised by CPS expert Anna-Lena Schulz KMF therefore offered three week summer courses in all parts of Myanmar including regions where ethnic minorities live.

Myanmar urgently needs non-violent conflict solutions as laid out in the CPS program. Although the military is now rarely seen in public the structures of the

former security apparatus are still existent while the general political climate deteriorates again. Secret police agents are present whenever the CPS organises any bigger event. Many people are still frightened to discuss politics in public, and words like “peace” or “education for education” are considered to be “political”. Some 130 ethnic minorities live in Myanmar which under the name of Burma gained independence of British colonial rule in 1948. The treatment of the Muslim Rohingya people living in the North of the State of Rakhine by the military caused a worldwide outcry. Their expulsion to Bangladesh by force was justified by claiming that the Rohingya people were not citizens of Myanmar but illegal foreign immigrants. When the de-facto state leader Aung San Suu Kyi did not comment on these developments for a long time whilst being generally lenient towards the military her former popularity began to wane. Since her NLD party took over government the economic situation of Myanmar with its wealth of natural resources has hardly improved. The infrastructure is in tatters with frequent power cuts even in Yangon. At the same time violence is escalating yet again in Northern Myanmar where more than twenty armed ethnic resistance groups have been fighting the Army stubbornly, in some cases for decades. Around 100,000 people are considered to be internally displaced with domestic and international aid agencies having little access to them.

Therefore, Anna-Lena Schulz and Bo Bo Lwin look with pride at their successful work at Salaing University of Education so far. They tell of highly motivated students who have now taken ownership of the education for peace project. Many activities are now being organised by the students themselves including an interfaith exchange of information. Students are invited to visit a mosque, or a Hindu temple, or a Christian church to talk with the clerics. Education for peace was the topic of an exhibition on the college campus. A “Peace Festival” organised by the students attracted over 1,000 participants. Contacts between lecturers and students were established. Newly acquired knowledge was passed on and awareness raised. Many people were encouraged to join in.

Bo Bo Lwin attended with Anna-Lena Schulz the International CPS exchange on peace education 1st – 4th October 2018 in Erfurt/Germany where both reported on the joint work of CPS and KMF in Myanmar. They were also informed as to how “Education for Peace” is handled in other countries noticing that the CPS is sometimes even formally asked to contribute to national education reforms. Myanmar is nowhere near such a situation. His students are still swimming against the currents admits Bo Bo Lwin who is nevertheless looking ahead with optimism. In his opinion some things could be changed within the next two or three years. “Hopefully”, adds Anna-Lena Schulz, laughing.