

# Rural to Urban Culture Programs – *Implementation Insights*

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## Abstract

Partnership for Change (PfC) provides programs and assistance to both urban and rural Myanmar communities to improve the economic and social opportunities for local business and community leaders. The PfC support model builds skills that lead to new economic options, especially for young adults starting new social enterprise ventures. An important aspect of the PfC community engagement model is the recognition and support of the arts and culture of the community. In both rural and urban Myanmar, PfC programs for art, music, and cultural literacy and heritage surround the practical skill building efforts, and enhance the vitality of the community. Pilot programs in smaller towns provide learning opportunities to refine and improve programs before broader implementation in more expensive urban settings. PfC programs include specific music, art, literature, and cultural heritage programs, and the connections and integration between the programs demonstrate the positive benefits from the approach.

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## Introduction

Myanmar is emerging from decades of repressive government. The country has a rich heritage of literature, dance, art and music, but many traditional forms of culture have not received support for decades. Partnership for Change (PfC) provides programs and assistance to both urban and rural communities in Myanmar to improve the economic opportunities. The PfC model for community support builds skills that lead to new options, especially for the young adults in the community through new social enterprise ventures. An important aspect of the PfC community engagement model is the recognition and support of the arts and culture of the community. In both rural and urban Myanmar, PfC programs for art, music, and cultural literacy and heritage surround the practical skill building efforts, and enhance the vitality of the community. Pilot programs in smaller towns provide learning opportunities to refine and improve programs before broader implementation in more expensive urban settings. PfC programs will include specific urban music, art, literature, and cultural heritage programs in both urban and rural, and the connections and integration between the programs demonstrate the positive benefits from the approach.

This paper describes culture programs that start as activities in non-urban settings and then the insights gained are applied to more expensive and complicated urban settings. These programs result from practical community driven requirements and requests, and are not research projects per se. Therefore the author asks for an understanding that this is a description of activities that seem to have benefit, and would perhaps have some interest in the more rigorous academic community.

## What is Partnership for Change?

Partnership for Change is a Norwegian organization that envisions a world of 9 billion people who can live within the limits of the planet. The mission of Partnership for Change (PfC) is to inspire and enable local change makers to achieve global change. PfC uses four approaches to achieve this global change:

- Programs to empower local communities
- Partnerships to extend and leverage local projects
- Access to knowledge and tools that work
- Participation in arenas to contribute and collaborate with others

Partnership for Change implements programs in several areas in Myanmar:

- Yangon – women's entrepreneurship, community education and culture programs
- Inle Lake – entrepreneurship, environment, community education and culture programs
- Chin State – community education
- Kachin State – endangered species research and conservation

The typical population for PfC programs is the young adults of Myanmar seeking job skills, business opportunities, and willing to work toward preserving their heritage and their environment.



Figure 1. PfC Myanmar Community Engagement Model.

#### Rural or Non-Urban Culture Programs

PfC started in early 2013 in the southern Shan state in a beautiful lake area, rich in culture and ethnic diversity. The early programs were very practical, skill building programs that had great community support and were tailored to the community schedules and activities. For example, the first project was a hospitality vocational school situated on a beautiful area of the lake providing basic restaurant and hotel skills for 40 impoverished students each year. The school also includes a restaurant and a set of six bungalows, all up to international standards and with architecture and décor that represents the local traditions. This school provides cultural training in addition to the hospitality skills. Another early program is an immersion program for English as a Second Language. In addition to the expected program of grammar, vocabulary, and conversation, the students – as part of their skill building – produce an informal talent show with music and dance performances – traditional and contemporary.

In the Inle Lake area, PfC supports a unique project, “Inle Speaks”. This is a community resource center to help focus efforts to learn about the environment and to provide solutions for environmental and cultural heritage. This center hosts informal art and culture projects, including the following:

- The Scream from Nature with Solar Lamps – this project invited a Norwegian artist, Lise Wulff, the founder of the “Scream from Nature” art program in Norway, with a solar lamp manufacturer to work with more than 100 school children from the Mein Tauck Orphanage School to do a solar lamp project.

The children first collected trash from around the lake and formed it into a scream, then in the evening, they placed lamps into a “scream” shape and one by one picked up the lamps and carried them onto the lake.

- The Inle Speaks wall mural – two community art projects with children were used to create vibrant wall murals on the back wall of the Inle Speaks building to illustrate how the environment challenges impact the lake.
- Music instruments and uniforms – Ms. Ingrid Stange donated new music instruments and uniforms for the student marching band at the local Nyaung Shwe school.

In the coming 2015 year, Partnership for Change and Inle Speaks plan to support the new traditional Inle Music festival, collaborate on a Shan “Culture House” renovation project, and a “Green School” pilot for bamboo architecture.



Figure 2. Children painting an environmental art wall mural at Inle Speaks, Nyaung Shwe.



Figure 3. Participants from the Pa O tribe ready to perform a traditional dance at the summer ESL Immersion program.

### What Did We Learn From the “Non-urban” Projects?

- Finding the right community partners – relationships with local organizations take time to research and develop.
- Working with official organizations and shadow organizations – Myanmar has very complex official agencies and structures, and sometimes the decision and approval processes are very long and involve unanticipated groups or organizations.
- Estimating budgets – budgets need to include the activities involved in partnerships and collaborations, and the intense social nature of Myanmar partnerships.
- Sharing the joy and appreciation of art, literature and music builds community trust – one of the best ways to build relationships and trust in the community is to help performers and enjoy their art and performances
- Developing patience and persistence – be prepared for setbacks and other difficulties, keep a firm focus and be very polite and gracious, but very persistent.

### How Do We Plan to Use These Experiences to Implement Urban Art and Culture Programs?

2014 was a year of getting to know people active in the art and culture organizations in Yangon. The city has many resources; many skilled performers and many different organizations contribute to the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Myanmar. PfC is gradually meeting, contributing to small art exhibits and events, and learning about the communities of writers, artists, musicians, and performers. With small steps to help existing galleries and exhibits, PfC is building a reputation for “informed helping” and an interest in appreciating what already exists and already works.

During 2015, PfC will continue this relationship building and small-scale support activities. In addition, through collaboration with Hedda Foundation, PfC will support additional urban cultural events, including the rebuilding of the current Gitameit music school. PfC will partner with an urban art gallery to host one or more “urban scream” projects.

PfC is analyzing a request for help to start a “pop-up literary café” using inexpensive pick up trucks to explore whether a physical Literary Café is feasible in the downtown or University area. A very important focus for the PfC cultural support in 2015 is to learn about the “cultural economy” – how the writers, artists, musicians, and performers actually start and sustain business and revenue streams.

An example of a small culture project in 2014 was the PfC sponsorship of a Textile Exhibit at the downtown Yangon River Ayeyarwaddy Art gallery in December. The Founder of the gallery, Ma Phyu Ei Thein, was also a winner in the November Social Entrepreneurship competition at Myanmar Women’s Entrepreneurship Day, also sponsored by PfC.

Myanmar has a very strong literary tradition and writers, poets, dramatists and journalists are now active in Yangon, Mandalay and other cities. There are few

places for literary communities to gather and participate in readings and reviews of their work. A request under consideration is to support a “Pop-Up Literary Café”, that would host small street gatherings in central Yangon, using rented trucks, sound equipment and catered food and beverage service. These events will be started with one small pilot pop-up café to assess interest, followed by additional events in other areas of the city.

The Hedda Foundation, founded by Geir Johnson, plans to develop a literature café using a heritage building in a downtown area.



Figure 4. Ma Phyus Ei Thein at River Ayeyarwaddy Gallery.

#### Insights About How to Succeed?

From the non-urban small programs, and the small projects starting in Yangon, these are the insights about how to succeed with larger, more complex and expensive projects:

- Get to know the relevant “community” – in the urban Yangon area, this is a lengthy process, and for any specific project involves multiple organizations, and different leaders and decision processes.
- Mobilize people and resources – start with a small project that is a priority to the relevant “community”, build trust and expertise on resources, find allies and advocates – both public and private sector.
- Seed support from diverse, non-traditional partners
  - As an example, PfC programs for entrepreneurs led to relationships in the tech incubator space in Yangon; environmental art programs led to experts in film and music for other programs.
- Build trust among partners – always under promise and over deliver.
- Look at informal opportunities to build knowledge, skills and expertise.

### Conclusion

In complex and challenging situations such as the urban core of Myanmar, it is sensible to learn about the bureaucracy in less chaotic locales. PfC has successfully done small projects in “non-urban” areas and is now ready to apply those learnings to the complex opportunities of Yangon.



Figure 5. The painter's table at Inle Speaks, Nyaung Shwe.

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