

Empowering voices to shape Myanmar's future



For as long as she can remember, Ngu Wah Win has undertaken research to find answers to Myanmar's toughest development challenges. In 2012, while working at the Centre for Economic and Social Development, she was part of an IDRC-supported project that would lay the groundwork for the country's first-ever minimum wage. "At that time, I did not understand the policymaking process, how the various players were connected with each other," she says.

In 2015, Ngu Wah Win and other researchers helped inform Myanmar's first minimum wage — an achievement that would improve the lives of millions, particularly women working in the manufacturing and garment sectors. For Ngu Wah, an economics graduate, it was a proud milestone. Like her, many dedicated scholars and researchers are working towards building a more democratic and inclusive Myanmar. Since 2017, the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar (K4DM) initiative, supported by IDRC and Global Affairs Canada, has been instrumental in nurturing this new generation of scholars, researchers, and leaders.

As a research fellow supported through the K4DM initiative, Ngu Wah has continued to undertake research on home-based gig work and gender wage gaps, collaborating across ASEAN to drive policy change and empower women.

Building the foundations for research

In the first phase of the initiative in 2017, K4DM took stock of the underinvestment in research and higher education, as well as the capacity of think tanks, civil society, universities, and the government. With a CAD10.7 million investment that supported 18 projects involving more than 30 international, Canadian, and Myanmar partners, the research focused on building the capacity of aspiring leaders and independent think tanks.

Researchers worked with parliamentarians in Myanmar and government officials to improve governance through enhanced research skills. Run by the Parliamentary Centre, a Canadian organization, and the Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation, the research project helped them undertake independent, reliable legislative research. This would strengthen Myanmar's legislative capacity to discuss, legislate, draft budgets, and monitor expenditure.



The initiative was successful in strengthening the research capacity of parliamentarians, including their understanding of gender-responsive policymaking. "I have applied the knowledge to build a bridge in my constituency," said Daw Nang San San Aye, a 31-year-old parliamentarian. "I researched different types of bridges and was able to identify ones with reasonable costs."

The program also helped inform the education policy to strengthen research in higher education, working to reverse decades of underinvestment in the sector.

“

Since the launch of the second phase, more than 2,000 young scholars have been mentored and trained. Around 248 fellowships have been made available to scholars, of which 60 per cent were offered to women and individuals from ethnic communities. These fellowships have enabled higher education in countries like Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Canada.

Investing in a new generation of leaders

All these activities came to a halt on February 1, 2021, as the military junta seized power in Myanmar. To protect the gains achieved in the first phase, the K4DM initiative pivoted to shift its focus on supporting diaspora scholars while promoting inclusion, gender equality, diversity, and sustainable progress in Myanmar.

Since the launch of the second phase, more than 2,000 young scholars have been mentored and trained. Around 248 fellowships have been made available to scholars, of which 60 per cent were offered to women and individuals from ethnic communities. These fellowships have enabled higher education in countries like Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Canada.

K4DM is also strengthening the research capacity of women. Researchers from the Asian University of Women are studying issues affecting refugees in Cox's Bazaar, the world's largest refugee camp for Rohingya. They are undertaking research on refugee education, child marriage, energy access, health, and human-wildlife conflict.



Stories of resilience

Even as scholars like Ngu Wah pursued their PhDs, there were others like John Jonaid, a Rohingya, who fled Myanmar to save his life. Spending time in India, China, and Indonesia, John reached Ottawa in 2021 under Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees program. An IDRC fellow, John interned with a Canadian parliamentarian's office and advocated for support for Rohingya. He continues to be a powerful voice for his community and engages with the diaspora, advocating for refugee rights, and shedding light on the struggles of displaced Rohingya through his writings and research.

Another K4DM fellow, Jaivet Ealom's journey is one of extraordinary resilience. After fleeing Myanmar, he traversed six countries in search of asylum, ultimately finding refuge in Canada. As a K4DM fellow at the Myanmar Policy and Community Knowledge Hub at the University of Toronto's Asian Institute, he deepened his expertise in governance and policymaking. Today, he is the CEO of the Rohingya Centre of Canada and an advisor to Myanmar's National Unity Government.

Through inclusive research, leadership development, and capacity-building, K4DM is not just supporting researchers and young scholars—it is amplifying silenced voices. By empowering marginalized communities, this initiative is laying the foundation for a more democratic, inclusive, and just future for Myanmar.