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SNAPSHOT

Karenni youth groups demonstrate leadership through the Kayah State Youth Forum



Photo: Thiha Swe, DAI

Kayah youth discussing opportunities for media reform.

"This is the very first time Karenni youth groups had the opportunity to meet and hold frank discussions with the State Minister."

- *Mr. Khu Klaw Reh, Kayah Youth Forum Committee*

Telling Our Story

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Burmese Youth Join the Reform

From August 22 – 24, 2013, over 200 Karenni youth from Kayah, Kayin and Shan states demonstrated courage and leadership by being among the first members of their community to proactively discuss peace, reform and local development in a public space. The Karenni, a traditionally marginalized population, have not typically engaged the Burmese government on problems and prospective solutions. USAID/OTI identified Karenni youth as the entry point for engaging this population into the political reform process in the strategically important, conflict-prone Kayah state.

Capitalizing on this opportunity, the Kayah Youth Forum Committee (KYFC) organized and facilitated the three-day Kayah Youth Forum, with OTI support. A total of 216 youth attended, representing 26 youth organizations, networks, and faith-based entities from three of Burma's most eastern states. The youth discussed openings for reform, prospects for peace, and opportunities for local development, resulting in 41 statements and related action plans. The State Minister, U Khin Mg Oo, attended the forum, listening to the ideas and recommendations put forth by the youth. Mr. Khu Klaw Reh, a forum organizer, noted, "This is the very first time Karenni youth groups had the opportunity to meet and hold frank discussions with the State Minister."

"I believe our statements and action plans will help the local development of our Kayah State reform process because I have seen the openness of our State Minister in this forum", said Myo Hlaing Win from Student Union of Kayah State.

"The forum has motivated me to change the way I think about my State Government", Phyo Hein Htet from Mizzima Youth Group noted. "I want our group to now provide inputs to the reform process in my local area, Demawsoe Township", he continued.

As a secondary impact, this forum solidified the formation of the KYFC, which will soon link with the nation-wide Myanmar Youth Forum and eventually with the regional ASEAN Youth Forum, overcoming many of the traditional divisions and lack of trust that exist between organizations and activists.

The Kayah Youth Forum provided a rare opportunity for youth to voice their opinions and contribute to Burma's reform process. Karenni strengthened their youth networks, advocated for reform and development with local government leaders, and voiced their support for peace processes, resulting in a representation of diverse perspectives in the reform dialogue.

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