

## Myanmar/Burma

### Introduction

For a long time, and in the eyes of many, Myanmar/Burma was a country known mostly for its appalling human rights record, on the one hand, and its Nobel Peace laureate and tireless advocate for greater democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, on the other. Held in the tight grip of its military leaders, the country had been isolated for many years from the rest of the world, and multiple jurisdictions, including the EU, had imposed economic sanctions on Myanmar in response to its documented and systemic human rights violations.

More recently, however, the ground has begun to shift, severe restrictions on freedom of speech have been somewhat relaxed, and signs of reform are beginning to be visible. In this changing context, the Leprosy Mission (TLM), which has been working in Myanmar for over 100 years, is also embracing a period of transition, and moving towards a model more suited to the developing context of their work in Myanmar, where people and communities are finally beginning to emerge from the long trauma of a repressive and isolating military regime.

### Project details

As an international NGO with Irish roots, TLM is well known for its medical, charity and service delivery work, which has had a clear focus on people with leprosy and people living with the disabilities that they acquire as a result of the disease.

More recently, however, TLM Myanmar has been moving toward a more comprehensive community development model, which will enable the organisation to work in different areas of disability support and with a wider range of partners. Working in 16 locations across the country, TLM operates through Disability Resource Centres, whose work has received permission and approval from the government.

Disability advocacy is a critical area of sustainable development work in Myanmar, as 16% of all poverty in the country is associated with disability. Families which include a member with a disability are 10 times more likely to be living in severe poverty. And in a recent survey, 75% of the people with disabilities who took part indicated that they had no access at all to any information about the basic rights or forms of support to which they were entitled.

## Building Hope

**The 7-Up Disability Advocacy Project**, which will be supported by the 2014 World Development Appeal, aims to provide people with disabilities (PwD), as well as their families and the wider community, with the understanding and resources they need to embrace their rights as equal citizens and improve their standard of living. Phase 1 of the project has been very successful in laying the foundation for the work needed to fulfil these aims.

A National Disability Survey was undertaken, and the findings were shared with the members of Parliament. As a result, the government, having realised the benefit to them of doing so, signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People in December 2011. The first disability laws to be enacted since 1958 were prepared for Parliament earlier this year, and TLM was involved in their drafting.

Now that there has been significant development in high-level government policy, Phase 2 of the project will involve TLM working at more regional and local levels, with civil authorities, schools, churches, and disability organisations. Areas of work will include the creation of public examples of disability-friendly spaces; ensuring access to training, suitable employment and life-long learning; access to resources and facilities that will assist in improving function; and increasing the positive media portrayal of PwD. TLM estimates that over 30,000 people will directly benefit from this work.

*I used to feel sad and angry at the way other people looked at my daughter, said Daw Mya Mya Win. I had never met anyone who saw my daughter in the same way that I did, as an individual, a human being just like any other human being. But now I have become an optimistic and cheerful person again because I've received empathy and encouragement. I feel very lucky!*

Aye Aye Thein has a son, Htein, who lives with a disability. Her husband is a driver, and receives a very low wage. The Disability Resource Centre run by TLM in a suburb of Yangon has made a huge difference to their lives. *My son could not walk, she said to a visiting Tearfund staff member, and now he can. He could not read or count, and now he can. I hope that one day he can go to school and be included.* As she spoke, her son began to walk around the room, counting aloud and in English!

Thida Myint was 16 years old when she discovered she had leprosy. She was given drug therapy at her local hospital, but when she developed complications, she could only be treated on a limited outpatient basis, and as a result, she experienced a loss of sensation in her hands. Simple household chores resulted in injuries, and Thida became very depressed. Eventually, however, she was referred to a TLM sponsored hospital, where she learned how to prevent further damage to herself, and was trained as a carer for other leprosy patients.

Thanks to the **7-Up Disability Advocacy Project**, the scaffolding of hope is being constructed for people with disabilities in Myanmar. As the country emerges from the trauma of isolation and repression, The Leprosy Mission is building hope for some of Myanmar's most vulnerable citizens. It is our privilege to support them through the 2014 World Development Appeal.

All resources will be available on the World Development pages, which can be found at:  
**[www.presbyterianireland.org/world-development](http://www.presbyterianireland.org/world-development)**