

## Managing Tourism Under Strain in Myanmar

by  
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### Abstract

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries. Many poor countries see tourism as a way to alleviate poverty and they create special programs to promote it. Tourism, however, can also be destructive to both the environment and to local communities, leading many governments and international agencies to propose a new form of community-based tourism. This new form draws local communities into the planning and management of important tourist destinations. Myanmar illustrates some of the aspects of Community Based Tourism, but it has other distinguishing features as well. Myanmar is just now moving from more than half a century of repressive military rule to a system espousing greater democratic and free market processes. It also has a large number of extremely important tourist attractions, especially those related to its long Buddhist history. This case study focuses on the attempt to promote tourism at a site in remote, but historically significant, Mrauk-U that is undergoing some development and some strain. In this area, a more progressive and inclusive central government is encouraging the development of local associations and working with them to press for more effective local government. In this context, a strong local civil society is emerging, with new organizations pushing the local government to be more open and engaged with the community.

**Keywords:** Myanmar, Mrauk-U, Tourism, Public Participation, Local Governance

### The Setting

Myanmar is one of Southeast Asia's most ancient kingdoms. It was a major religious center into which Buddhism entered and became dominant in Mainland Southeast Asia. This has given Myanmar an extensive architectural heritage of temples and pagodas that today constitute a potentially rich tourist attraction. The British East Asia Company began encroaching on Myanmar (then Burma) in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the British Crown continued onto full conquest in 1885. This led to the exile of the king, the destruction of the monarchy, and a stressful link with India that saw a large influx of Indian merchants and moneylenders into the new colony. The anti-colonial movement gained considerable strength in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which led Burmese leaders to join the Japanese in driving out the British in the 1941-45 War in the Pacific. Burma gained independence in 1948 and rejected the offer to join the British Commonwealth. Ultimately changing its name to Myanmar, it operated as a democratic, socialist state until 1962. Then the military took control and maintained a repressive political and economic rule until the 1990s

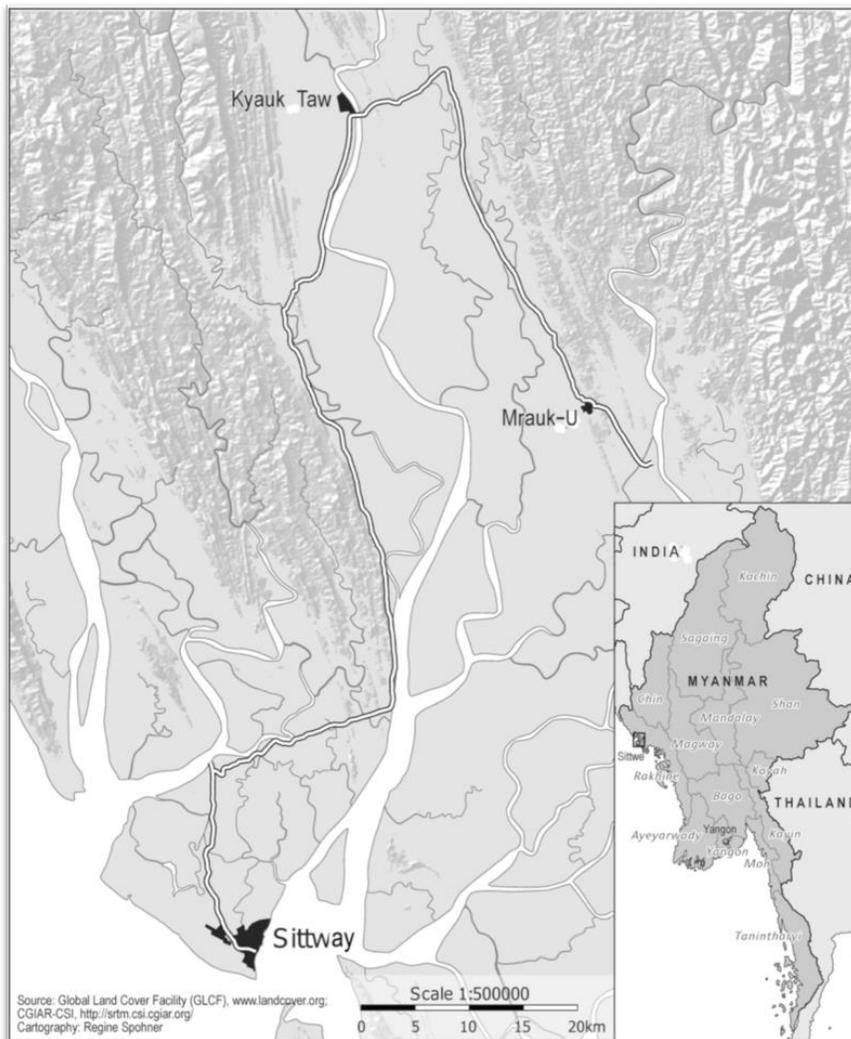
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when it became more of a free-market regime. Military rule ended in 2010 and Myanmar is now attempting to become an open, democratic society.

Myanmar has been a major center of temples and other religious attractions for a long time. Bagan in central Myanmar is the most famous site. Home of the Bagan Kings from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, this was the capital of the first kingdom to unite all the current regions of Myanmar. It was the site of literally thousands of temples and pagodas, of which 2,200 remain in a 40-square mile center. Today Bagan is a major tourist attraction that the central government has endeavored to restore. It attempted to have the United Nations declare Bagan a World Heritage Site. This failed, however, due to faulty maintenance and restoration, something that has been extensively criticized by national and international art experts and archeologists.

Figure 1. Location of Mrauk-U in Rakhine State



Second only to Bagan in temple density, Mrauk-U is another ancient city on the banks of a small tributary of the Kaladan River, over the Rakhine Mountains to the west of Bagan (Figure 1). Mrauk-U traces its roots to major kingdoms in the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Following this period, kingdoms flourished in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The last and greatest of the ancient Rakhine

Kingdoms was the Mrauk-U Kingdom, which flourished between 1433 and 1785 (Tun Shwe 2003; Myo Myint Sein 2009; Gutman 2001). During this period, Mrauk-U was a wealthy trading center, whose power extended to the Ganges delta on the west and to the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River on the east. It was ruled by a series of 49 kings who constructed a well-planned city with extensive canals and an impressive royal palace at the city center, and was protected by a 30-kilometer fortification (Shwe Zan 1995). The kings minted coins, made treaties, and traded with the Portuguese and the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Mrauk-U is distinguished by having the only *cut-stone* culture in Myanmar. It also exhibited high quality stone plaster works, glazed tiles, battens, and vaulted arches. The surrounding area is Myanmar's second richest rice plain, after the Mandalay region. With these conditions, the town should be well placed to support an extensive tourist industry that could greatly alleviate the region's deep poverty. Starting in 2014 the government undertook another attempt for the town to become a UN World Heritage Site, an effort that, because of the lack of trust people had toward it, heightened conflicts.

## **The Problem**

Myanmar has been officially promoting tourism since "Visit Myanmar Year" was proclaimed in 1996. This was followed by a series of laws and executive actions that facilitated tourist arrivals and visits. These efforts have accelerated since the new, more democratic government in 2010. A new Myanmar Responsible Tourism program and a Policy on Community Involvement in Tourism (CIT) were proclaimed in 2012 (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2013). These were followed by a Myanmar Master Tourism Plan for 2013-2020, announced in June 2013. This bold plan aimed to increase international tourist arrivals to over 7 million by 2020. One of the first principles of the new plan is to strengthen the institutional environment and civil society and to encourage local communities to participate in planning and managing the streams of tourists.

Although their arrivals have grown steadily in the past few years, only a very small number of foreign tourists visit Mrauk-U. International tourist arrivals for all of Myanmar totaled 791,505 in 2010, growing to 2.04 million in 2013. At its peak in 2011-12, Mrauk-U received only 4,815 international tourists; that was 1.27 percent of the arrivals through Yangon and Mandalay entry, or 0.45 percent of the total tourist arrivals to Myanmar.

Mrauk-U illustrates four major problems in Myanmar's attempts at tourism promotion. The first and most serious is the overall weakness of the physical infrastructure in Myanmar as a whole. Second is an often-heavy-handed government approach to cultural heritage protection and to infrastructure construction. Third is a weakness in allowing local community groups to have a voice in tourism development. Finally, there is the issue of security. Each of these deserves a brief statement.

Table 1. International tourist arrival to Yangon and Mandalay airports and arrival at Mrauk-U

Year	To Yangon and Mandalay by air (with tourist visa only)	Arrivals to Mrauk-U	Percentage of tourist arrivals at Mrauk-U (% of total)
1996-1997	110038	518	0.47
1997-1998	117490	609	0.52
1998-1999	119159	861	0.72
1999-2000	113940	1042	0.91
2000-2001	121016	1203	0.99
2001-2002	118325	1604	1.35
2002-2003	132468	1940	1.46
2003-2004	122940	1747	1.42
2004-2005	156015	1968	1.26
2005-2006	144628	2064	1.43
2006-2007	191979	2499	1.30
2007-2008	131784	2125	1.61
2008-2009	100439	1568	1.56
2009-2010	164000	2024	1.23
2010-2011	310688	3133	1
2011-2012	384755	4815	1.25
2012-2013	887295	543	0.06
2013-2014	1202103	3313	0.27

Source: CSO, 2005: 175, CSO, 2010: 493, Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 Archaeology Department, Mrauk-U, 2015<sup>2</sup>.

#### *Weak Physical Infrastructure*

Mrauk-U's isolation discourages tourism. It can be reached by road from the capital, Yangon, but this takes about 20 hours over sometimes poorly maintained roads. It also can be reached by air to Sittway, about a one-hour flight from the capital. This is followed by a four-hour boat trip up the Kalandan River and its tributaries. There is a road north to Kyauk Taw then back south to Mrauk-U, but its use by international tourists requires special permission from the Ministry of Defense. Government riverboats visit Mrauk-U only a few times a week. Private companies appear eager to accommodate the potential tourist increase, but obtaining permission to run a boat service often poses its own problems. The inadequate electrical infrastructure presents problems due to frequent outages, although this has improved recently due to the connection to the national grid system. The public water supply is not adequate and hotels and restaurants are not well developed. The transportation and urban infrastructure in Mrauk-U also are very weak (Zin Nwe Myint and Khin Myo Hla 2009 and Zin Nwe Myint 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The total international tourist arrivals in Myanmar was 1,058,995 in 2012 and 2,044,307 in 2013. However, arrivals to the Yangon and Mandalay entry points with tourist visas are used in this calculation. When compared with the total international tourist arrivals from all entry points, the percentage that reached Mrauk-U in 2011-2012 (highest arrival year) was only 0.45%. The lowest arrival in recent years was in 2012-2013, due to ethnic conflicts in Rakhine State.

### *Heritage Protection*

Improper temple restoration projects in Bagan already disqualified that site from receiving official recognition as a United Nations World Heritage Site. In addition, Rakhine State government's construction projects pose a serious threat. In Mrauk-U there are two examples of this problem. Restoration projects have destroyed the original structures of some of the pagodas, especially the upper part, the *Htee* umbrella, and replaced them with unauthentic structures. There is also conflict between local groups and the Archeology Department of Mrauk-U, which has the responsibility for the proper maintenance and restoration of temples. The most famous pagoda, the *Shitthaung* Pagoda, has a local Trustee Board that now allows donors to place their names on the pagoda, damaging its originality. The Board also permitted the paving of the main corridor that leads to the temple, obliterating the original structure's stair terraces.

### *Weak Protection for Civil Society*

Though the new government policies espouse a more community-based tourism strategy, local government has little experience working with, or even allowing the formation of, community groups that might have any appreciable power. The local Heritage Trust is an example of a new-found capacity of local citizens to mobilize to promote their interests. Though the local government was not very accepting of their views in the case of recent rail construction, the local group was successful in changing government plans.

There is also a Regional Tour Guide Association that has sprung up to promote tourism. Local government units still seem to be working out how to deal with these local community groups.

### *Security*

the Central Myanmar (Burman) population and outlying tribal groups. Rakhine state itself has been the scene of considerable violence between ethnic Rakhine Buddhist and immigrant Bengali Muslim groups. And there remain small, poorly armed but dangerous outlaw gangs that sometime prey on the local population.

The development of tourism in Mrauk-U holds the promise of increasing the welfare of the poor in this isolated western part of Myanmar. The central government has made legislative moves to assist, but much work needs to be done to realize tourism's potential. In Mrauk-U the local community has organized to help itself.

## **The Intervention**

Since 2011, with a new constitution, Myanmar's central governmental administrative and management processes have gradually changed. They have become more open and democratic, giving opportunities for local communities to organize for their own benefit. This change, however, has not always had an impact on the local administrative levels. Due to the weakness of local administrative bodies, conflicts can occur between local people and local government units. Central government interventions are only beginning in Mrauk-U, and it is a slow process. Moreover, the intermediate level Rakhine State Government also is encroaching in a cumbersome manner.

On the other hand, the local people have been encouraged to organize actively for themselves. For example, in Mrauk-U there are new community organizations for voluntary firefighting, a new society for free funeral services, a blood donor group, and a pagoda and monastery cleaning association. Many of them are as yet only weakly organized and they sometimes overlap. Nonetheless, civil society organizations are now playing an important role in the transformation of Myanmar in various ways from the local to national level. This is particularly true in Mrauk-U, where two associations related to cultural heritage conservation and tourism development have emerged: The Mrauk-U Heritage Trust and the Regional Tour Guide Association.

#### *Mrauk-U Heritage Trust*

As tourism in Mrauk-U is mainly based on its rich architectural heritage, the conservation of this heritage becomes an important activity expressing the authenticity of Rakhine people. Conservation, however, is not always easy.

In 2010, the central government of Myanmar planned to build a railroad connecting Sittway, capital of Rakhine State, and Minbu in central Myanmar. This was the first railroad to be built into Rakhine State. Unfortunately, the original route was planned to pass across the three important archaeological sites of ancient cities: *Dhanyawadi* (mid 4<sup>th</sup> to early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), *Vesali City* (6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) and *Mrauk-U* (1433-1785 CE). The people of Mrauk-U protested the construction of this railroad, because it would destroy the city walls, moats and other important structures. These were the sites being excavated by the national Archaeology Department, which had already found many important artifacts. Thus, in November 2010, a group of local people wrote a letter with photo documentation to the minister of the Ministry of Culture, Nay Pyi Taw.

In this letter, they requested the authorities to rethink the rail route and proposed an alternative that would save the important sites. Copies of the letter were also sent to the chief authority of the central government at that time. It also was sent to the commander of the Western Region Director General of the Archaeology Department of the National Archive and Library Department and the Sittway sub-office. In addition to these, the letter was sent to 12 main government departments. The Director General from Nay Pyi Taw came to Mrauk-U to talk to people there.

Afterward, the rail route was slightly changed but not enough to avoid damage. Nonetheless, the people were obliged to accept it because they had little leverage against the central government. Thus, the railroad continued through the middle of *Vesali City*, destroying the palace wall and many monuments.

Railroad construction was stopped in 2012, but this time it was due to ethnic conflict in Rakhine State. When it resumed, construction continued through Kyauk-Taw Town, where the route ran between the *Maha-muni* Pagoda wall and the *Dhanyawadi* Palace wall. They were only about 100 feet apart and damage was done to both the pagoda and the palace wall. The Chief of Staff of *Maha-muni* Pagoda Museum in Kyauk-Taw immediately informed the Ministry of Culture of this damage, but to no avail. Once again, local people had little voice.

By 2014 things had changed considerably. First, people had learned how to organize to have their voices heard. There had been open elections at the national level and an opposition party had won some seats and joined the parliament. The central government then found it could

work with the opposition. Thus, it became more receptive and more willing to listen to those voices from below, although sensitive issues remained, such as land grabbing by powerful interests.

A local association, Mrauk-U Heritage Trust (MHT) was founded in April 2014. It was initially organized to prevent the construction of the railroad that would destroy the ancient archaeological and cultural monument zone of Mrauk-U and the ancient cities of *Dhanyawadi* and *Vesali*, but soon expanded to broader aims.

The MHT began with 11 monks, seven lay people as patrons, and 76 core members, all participating voluntarily. Although it was not yet registered at the Ministry of Home Affairs, the association was systematically organized. A retired person from the Archaeology Department of the city of Mrauk-U was selected as the head of the Trust. The local people also elected two deputy heads, two secretaries, and two treasurers. They are mostly retirees from the city Archaeology and Education Departments and from other government institutions. The majority of the members, however, are non-government employees, local business persons, and many young people. The membership in this association is steadily increasing.

The primary aim of the Trust is to protect Mrauk-U and its environs from any further losses or damage to existing cultural resources. These are valued as the tangible heritage marking the history and culture of Rakhine. Other objectives of the MHT are to reveal the traditional Rakhine culture to others in Myanmar and from the rest of the world; to educate the local people, especially the young, to value the cultural resources of Mrauk-U and Rakhine tradition; and, finally, to keep Mrauk-U a clean town.

Four working groups have been created: a public relations and communications group; a fund-raising group; a group to collect data on the heritage resources; and a law advisory group. This displays a high degree of organizing capacity in the community. The Trust has become the main node for a larger network with other civil organizations in Mrauk-U. It also is connected with active people from Sittway. This network is united under the leadership of MHT and is the mechanism through which people have increased the strength of their voice. The MHT and local people now believe that their town, Mrauk-U, will be revived through the tourism that is attracted to their cultural resources. In addition, through the MHT, Mrauk-U citizens have become more aware of their own heritage.

MHT has intervened in many cases to protect the cultural resources in Mrauk-U. Two cases illustrate this activity. The most important case involved the construction of a railroad that endangered the Mrauk-U heritage zone. Another concerned the location of a new town hall.

#### *Railroad Construction*

In 2014, a railroad route was planned to run very close to the *Koe-thaung* Pagoda, one of the most important structures in Mrauk-U. This mobilized the local people in a strong protest. This time, the chief authority of the Mrauk-U District Administration Department came and negotiated with the local people at *Koe-thaung* Pagoda. The negotiations were stressful as the District Administrator accused them of trying to sabotage this important government program. This time people decided to protest more broadly and systematically, following the lead of the MHT.

A public meeting was immediately called at a monastery ordination hall in October 2014. The deputy head of the Trust explained the current situation of rail construction and its effects

on cultural heritage sites. Then he asked what people desired. More than 150 local people attending the meeting wanted to protect the heritage. Since then, people became alerted and informed through the informal networks of the village. They wanted to stop the current rail construction and design a new rail route that would not be harmful to the Mrauk-U heritage zone.

The Trust decided to write a protest letter with local signatures. It produced a seven-page letter with much empirical evidence explaining the basis of the protest and showing how the proposed rail plan would be destructive of important cultural structures. It also researched and then cited a conservation law for ancient buildings of the Archaeology Department of the Ministry of Culture in support of cultural protection. It requested the government to try to obtain UNESCO recognition of Mrauk-U as a World Heritage Site. A campaign in Mrauk-U was launched that gained more than 400 signatures.

This protest letter was sent to the minister of the Ministry of Culture with copies to the President of Myanmar, the Minister of Rail Transport, the Chief Minister of Rakhine State Government, and other local officials and to the supreme legislative body of Rakhine State government. Finally, it was sent to all the newly established, and now legal, political parties of Rakhine State.

Due to the request by MHT, the chief minister of the Rakhine State government invited the authorities from Ministry of Culture and a UNESCO World Heritage expert to make preliminary investigations in Mrauk-U. In March 2015, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture, the Director General of the Archaeology Department, and a senior expert of the UNESCO Heritage Committee visited Mrauk-U.

This time the voice of the people was heard. Rail construction was halted and inquiries began again. Currently, negotiations with local people on how to protect the heritage zone of Mrauk-U from rail construction are taking place with Myanmar Railways, construction companies, and the Archaeology Department of Nay Pyi Taw. The Ministry of Culture also sent a team of inquiry to Mrauk-U, headed by a Deputy Minister.

The MHT was invited to attend the meeting and discussions in Mrauk-U during the visit of the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture. The deputy head of MHT explained the Trust's understanding of the situation and the strong opinions of people related to railroad construction and heritage conservation. The discussion was intense, with the deputy minister congratulating MHT and offering suggestions.

The MHT leaders also have discussed more broadly the conservation works funded from the Rakhine State government budget, which was 670 million kyats (about USD 670,000) for the 2015 budget year. Almost all the conservation work was improperly or poorly done, and some projects even destroyed the originality of the heritage resources. This work was assigned to 11 construction companies through auction and these companies hired unskilled local masons who had no training in conservation work. The MHT pointed out that the originality of the heritage resources was lost. To prevent such practices, the Deputy Minister of Culture requested MHT to create a "Watch" group in MHT to check on the conservation work in Mrauk-U.

The Deputy Minister invited two MHT members to travel to Bagan to attend the workshop on heritage conservation being conducted there. She also asked for five people from MHT to attend a training class on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in heritage conservation in Pyay. The training was held in Pyay because of *Serikestra*, which became the first recognized UNESCO World Heritage Site in Myanmar in June 2014. Another achievement was the invitation of two

people from MHT to join the Ministry's excursion team to Cambodia and Thailand in June 2015 to learn about heritage conservation.

#### *Town Hall Construction*

The second successful action by MHT was the prevention of the construction of a town hall in a historically important location in early 2015. For the first time, Mrauk-U was to receive 200 million kyats (about USD 200,000) from Rakhine State government for the construction of a town hall. This was an unbelievable sum to the people of Mrauk-U and they were happy to receive this support. The construction contract was let out for bids and a local company won the contract. The company and members of the local administration, the head of the township General Administrative Department (GAD), and the head of the Department of Development Affairs selected the site for the town hall. They chose a place where the royal funeral of Rakhine kings had taken place, an extremely important part of Mrauk-U's cultural heritage.

MHT and many people objected to this site selection. Some people were, however, fearful that this massive amount of money would be taken away if the local government's site selection was rejected. This caused some internal disagreement in the town, and the GAD authorities called a public meeting. Some accepted the GAD's idea and agreed with the construction at the royal cemetery site. The MHT did not, however, and argued to preserve this important cultural heritage. Due to strong unity within the MHT, a new site was selected by local people near the Mrauk-U port, where vacant land was available. Two main government institutions of Mrauk-U, GAD and the Department of Development Affairs, accepted this site. The construction company that won the auction stated simply that it would build only where the local people wished. The town hall of Mrauk-U is now under construction.

The MHT has established a watchdog group to review construction and conservation works funded by the State Government. Construction contracts are awarded by open auction, often won by companies that do not have properly skilled labor. The MHT now has requested the Ministry of Culture for assistance in finding skilled staff and workers to reinforce the Archaeology Department of Mrauk-U.

#### *The Regional Tour Guide Association of Mrauk-U*

The two main tourist attractions in Rakhine State are Ngapali beach and Mrauk-U. In the Mrauk-U region alone there are about 14 local tour guides and in the whole Rakhine State about 30. To upgrade the quality and skill of local tour guides, the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism had arranged a basic training course for local tourist guides in Sittway during July 2013. More than 30 local tour guides attended, mainly from Sittway, Kyauk-phyu, Mrauk-U, and Kyauk-Taw, with two from Bagan. After this training course, and following the advice of trainers from the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, the Regional Guide Society of Mrauk-U was founded on July 15, 2013. Currently, there are 17 core committee members, headed by the most senior guide in Mrauk-U, who had started a tour guide service in 1996.

The primary aim of this newly formed regional tour guide association is to encourage sustainable tourism development in Rakhine State. Its more specific objectives are to develop cultural tourism, ecotourism, and community based tourism in Rakhine State. Assistance to international tourists and upgrading the skills of local tour guides also are included. Above all, the association aims to conserve the national cultural heritage sites and to improve the socioeconomic condition of local people through tourism.

The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism set up the overall plan and guidelines and adopted 12 main goals. The ministry cannot, however, make a place-based tourism management plan for each important tourist attraction site. Thus, local associations are important in preparing the needed plans. Members of this new tour guide association collaboratively prepared a tourism development plan for Mrauk-U in collaboration with the head of Mrauk-U's Hotel and Tourism Department.

The tourism development plan for Mrauk-U assessed the current situation of the tourism business using a Strengths-Weakness-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis. The analysis was successfully done and, along with the plan, suggestions were given to all sectors of tourism in Mrauk-U. The plan even evaluated the needs and weakness of district- and state-level government institutions, showing how they could more efficiently support tourism development. Many suggestions have been made to improve the performance of local government institutions in promoting tourism development of Mrauk-U.

This place-based tourism development plan and its sustainability and community-inclusive ideas have been submitted to Rakhine State government through the District Administration Department. In effect, local associations are showing the local government that they are not a threat, but can be effective collaborators for everyone's benefit.

The Mrauk-U branch of the Tour Guide Association, which is the more active of the Association's two branches, also is helping improve the livelihood of the people. This is especially evident where tour guides take international visitors to visit the Chin villages along the Laymyo (*Lemro*) River, where the well-known *tattooed women* live.<sup>3</sup> Almost all international tourists to Mrauk-U visit these villages. While tourists would give money to the tattooed women for photographing them, in some cases the women preferred to hide when tourists visited their village. International tourists also used to give sweets to the children, but now the tour guides ask them not to give candy or sweets as it is harmful to children's teeth and the plastic packaging pollutes the area.

Local tour guides started addressing these issues individually long before the government's adoption of community-based tourism, but it has become more effective through another group of guides. The Tour Guide Society of Mrauk-U was formed in 2010. Much earlier, a senior tour guide got the idea of requesting small amounts of money for the construction of a school. He started with his own money and, with the help of two other guides, a primary school was constructed in *Kone-chaung* village in 1998. The challenge was to find a teacher for the children after the school building was constructed. To attract a teacher, a salary was paid and, in addition, rice also was provided for the whole year. The tour guide group organized a school management committee for the village. They not only met with the village head and elders but also included the tattooed women as the most important attraction of the villages. The women did not understand much at the beginning, but they came to understand and now actively participate in the school development. The tour guide group prepared vouchers in English for accepting donations of money from tourists. Every tour guide was thoroughly informed to fill-in,

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<sup>3</sup> These women have a special pattern of tattoos on their faces. The tattooing practice historically was used to differentiate the different clans of Chin tribes. Many believed it was to prevent marriage by Burmese kings. Today it is one of the living remnants of the ancient traditions. There are few women left practicing this and they are getting old.

in English, the amount of the donation and its uses. This allows tourists to understand fully what they are contributing to and provides a check on the program.

When the tour season is over, the guides go to *Kone-chaung* to deliver the money they have collected to the school committee members and village head. Foreign currencies are converted to Myanmar currency according to the current rate. This money is placed in a bank account in Mrauk-U, with three witnesses. The salary for the teacher and other necessary costs for the school are paid from this account. When donations from tourists are not sufficient, the local tour guides collect some money among themselves to support the school. Special notices are written in English at the school for international tourists who ask about giving books, pencils, pens, and other necessary items for children instead of candy. When the initial group of children passed the primary grades, the school was extended to the middle grades. This little school in Kone-chaung village has become very successful. Schools were built slowly after 2000 in other villages, organized by local tour guides.

They collected the donations from tourists and, when they had sufficient funds, they built small, primary schools in villages that had no schools. Knowing the effort of local tour guides and understanding the situation of the remote villages, a group of Italian tourists donated money to a school in *Shaw-may* village with full furniture, including blackboards and benches in the classrooms. In this case, the local tour guide group supported the village by managing the whole construction work.

Currently, there are six schools with 573 children under the Tour Guide Association program. From these schools, ten students went on to obtain university degrees. Some of them are now serving as teachers in these schools.<sup>4</sup> In 2010, even before the Tour Guide Association was formed, guides and school committees of the villages asked the Ministry of Education to support teachers in these schools. The ministry supports two teachers in Pan-baung village and one each in Kone-chaung, Kyee-chaung, and Shaw-may villages.

When tour guides visit a school with tourists they will encourage the students not to throw away plastic waste carelessly and they provide large bags to collect and remove the waste. The result is that the villages are free from plastic waste and children's behavior is a pleasant surprise to tourists.

Another contribution to these villages by local guides is to promote traditional crafts and skills. In these Chin villages, the older women weave using traditional methods, which are unique. The danger is that when these women pass away, the weaving method and technique will be lost. The main difficulty for the weavers was the availability of cotton thread. The tour guide association buys cotton to allow them to continue weaving. The women have now developed a special market in Pan-baung village of Chin selling hand-made woven products, such as shawls and *longi* (traditional sarongs) with distinctive indigenous designs. They are sold at favorable prices. The village women must pay back the money that the guides provided, thus teaching the local women to engage in modern market transactions. The tour guide association does not take

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<sup>4</sup> Most students cannot continue their education because they are too poor. Obtaining a degree is a great accomplishment in these remote villages. In places, the living situation is so difficult that most parents do not even think about schooling for their children. In addition, it is very difficult to get teachers to come, despite many request letters to the Ministry of Education. This is the gap that the tour guide society wanted to fill in.

any profits from the village women. In this way the livelihood of the people in these Chin villages has improved substantially.

Today the Tour Guide Association is looking for a way to support health clinics in these remote Chin villages where the government cannot support them. The main difficulties at this time are the funding and availability of qualified medical personnel.

## **The Outcomes**

In 2011 Myanmar began a remarkable transformation. It set aside half a century of military dictatorship, withdrawal from the world, and suspicion of any local dissidence. With a new constitution, it began transforming itself into a democratic society. For the first time in five decades, open and free elections were held that brought an opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), into the parliament. This opposition was still very much in the minority, with the majority in the hands of retired military leaders until the election in November 2015.

The NLD won the majority of the seats for the next term of parliament. As a result, the government is more open both to the rest of the world and to its own citizens. There remains resistance in the military and there is little experience in truly democratic governance. The performance of government institutions during this transformation is hesitant and uncertain in all sectors, but there is movement.

Between the central government and the people stand the local governments. Here, too, there is uncertainty and weakness in providing human services. Rather than taking the initiative, these local units prefer to wait for orders from above. There is also a long-standing suspicion of any popular local organization. The local government staff in Mrauk-U took no initiative regarding the critical issue of conservation of cultural heritage sites.

At the local level the new constitution encouraged people to organize for their own benefit. Local political parties were formed and a great variety of self-help associations have been formed. When the MHT was organized to prevent damage to the local monuments, it first was perceived as a problematic group by the local government. The MHT persisted, however, and learned to make its voice heard. On its side, the central government began to listen to those local voices. Although the local government does not have good relations with the MHT, the central government is encouraging and supportive. An example is the heritage conservation workshop in Bagan that was noted earlier.

Due to MHT activity and its effort to communicate with government ministers, the gap between the local people and the ministerial level has been narrowed in Mrauk-U. As direct communication becomes possible, more trust is being built between the central government and local people. This puts some pressure on local government organizations and now these institutions, especially the General Administrative Department, are becoming more attuned to the voices of local people. Thanks to this recognition, the local people now dare to think of managing their own future.

The Regional Tour Guide Association of Mrauk-U initiated a community based tourism development plan. Currently, the local tour guide association of Mrauk-U and the Township Administration Department under the Ministry of Home Affairs are cooperating for the safety and security of tourists in Mrauk-U region. This remarkable local association is also very effective in promoting the wealth and welfare of the poor villages to which it takes tourists.

Myanmar is in the process of a most remarkable, and most difficult, transition. From a closed country with a repressive military dictatorship, it is attempting to turn itself into an open, democratic country. One important step in this transition is the promotion of tourism, for which the country has a rich resource of religious structures from a history that goes back almost two millennia. In seeking to protect its rich heritage in Mrauk-U, the country is being assisted by local associations that are being formed to give voice to the local people. Encouraged by the new central government, this local association is making a profound impact on the town, and also on local government. In effect a new and more vigorous form of local government is being promoted by the good relationship between the central government and the local people. If the new national government is more open and gives more freedom to the citizens of Mrauk-U, and with more clear responsibility sharing among government institutions, socio-economic development of Mrauk-U tourism can have significant and broad-based benefits.

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