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# IDIN Research Report



**Location:** Kyaukme,  
Shan State, Myanmar

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## Context

Burning trash, waste strewn along streets, rivers invisible under their cover of garbage...

Myanmar is struggling with many issues as it ascends to the playfield of more open international trade and a loosening of the totalitarian military regime. One of these that caught my attention is the waste problem. According to a UN committee, Myanmar had only 2 landfills in 2005. There are no separated recycling bins, and recycling is done mostly by poor recycling collectors that pick the recyclable items out of piles of trash. Many plastic packaging articles have infiltrated the market as especially China and Thailand take advantage of easier trade possibilities to Myanmar. Yet there is simply no end-stream for these kinds of materials, which always end up burnt or as litter. Yet burning plastic releases one of the most poisonous toxins known, dioxin. And due to plastic's nature, it cannot be broken down easily, and first splits into smaller pieces when in contact with light, aggravating the problem as the plastic then spreads more easily up the food chain after ingestion by river creatures, and dispersed across the soil. Just 20 years ago the people of Myanmar were accustomed to solely organic packaging materials, and the habit of tossing had no negative consequences. A sudden influx of modern goods crashed this biological cycle, and left Myanmar people without any comprehensive solutions.



Informal dumpsite near a train station



River canal filled with trash

In general the infrastructure in Myanmar is quite poor as compared to countries in that region. As the military junta ruling for 60 years was more preoccupied with personal wealth than national wealth and welfare, most infrastructures, especially in the ethnic provinces away from the central Burmese ethnic division, crippled and stunted. One woman in Kyaukme recalls “When I was a child, there were not so many mosquitos. The drains were very deep.... But after Ne Win [military dictator the staged the coup d’état to gain control of the country] took power, the drains are not cleaned.” There are drain cleaners employed by the government in the towns, but lower levels of government work is not seriously taken and government employees come sporadically and for only a few of their hours. Supervision is equally unreliable and bosses themselves take off in much the same way. Now the drains in the town are almost full with plastic packaging, mud, weeds, and various other obstructants. Because of this, during the rainy season they often prove infective against flooding, the prevention of which was the original intention of the drains.



**Town drain with litter**



**Flood in June 2014**

Corruption extends to all matters of government. In Kyaukme, the mayor is infamous for lavish corruption and the funneling of public money into his private expenses. As the owner of a hotel (among many other businesses), he crushed out competition through both intimidation and the revokal of other hotels’ licenses, including his own cousin’s. The planning of the town landfill was similarly laced in corruption. The space was reserved for 5 acres of land, yet the now-overflowing landfill, extending onto both sides of the streets around it, is clearly much less than this, and it is believed the official responsible for its planning sold 4 of the acres to the farmers of the surrounding fields. As corruption pervades almost every aspect of public life and the memory of a police state surveilling words and actions – still in place merely a few years ago – haunts, the

people have for the most part given up hope of the system changing itself (especially in the intentionally underdeveloped ethnic provinces) and are not keen to spur about change. This attitude of accepting conditions as they are and the squelching of free thinking in the educational system – in which students are taught more than anything else to obey and that answers must be memorized, not thought over – is another huge component to the perpetuation of the waste and other social problems. The people simply do not act on it.

# Background

I personally first became acquainted with Myanmar in February 2014, during which time I visited the country as a tourist. The country left me fascinated but also concerned, as the people live under oppressive and unsanitary conditions. I was shocked by the inability to deal with such a simple societal need in Myanmar as waste disposal. I saw rivers unrecognizable from landfills under their coating of debris, gargantuan piles of trash near public facilities such as train stations, and the reliably constant smokestacks of trash burning in the evenings that pervaded the air around with their choking fumes and clouded the sky to Burma's famously beautiful sunsets.



Trash burning spots in historic Bagan



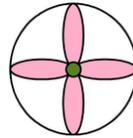
Trash burning in the evenings

I had a short time thereafter stumbled upon a learning-living community at MIT centered around the theme of international development, that also encouraged its inhabitants to create such projects. I then refined my ideas of my project and made it more concrete. Despite having no real experience in this field, I felt very passionately about the issue and worked diligently on creating an approach to the issue. I took classes at MIT's D-Lab (Development Lab), which has diverse classes on the topics within international development, including waste. I had determined it was best, due to the scarcity of available information related to this issue online, to scope out the area for myself and conduct an analysis of the various aspects related to the issue, including stakeholders, waste path, and waste composition. My project partner and I gained much important information this way, and were then able to formulate an additional implementary project that summer. As we had determined the issues to be a combination of education and infrastructure, the implementation phase in June 2014 consisted of an awareness campaign targeting mostly students, but also including a public river cleanup event, and

an attempt to merge stakeholders and create a more established recycling infrastructure with more regular collection. More detailed information about these projects can be found on [lincmyanmar.web.com](http://lincmyanmar.web.com) (project website) and [wastefreemyanmar.webs.com](http://wastefreemyanmar.webs.com) (Waste-Free Myanmar organization's website).



LINC Myanmar



Waste-Free Myanmar

**The March 2014 and June 2014 projects**

**My newly-forming organization**

These projects allowed me to meet various townspeople, some of which were extremely creative and gained success in novel ways. For this research, I also looked to some of these people and present their stories and their particular methods of innovation.

## Case Study #1: Sai Than Maung

Sai Than Maung is the successful owner of a traditional medicine factory as well as a generous public benefactor and local party member. His traditional medicine factory is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most popular brand in Myanmar, a claim to fame that he almost single-handedly brought about. His dedication to only the best ingredients from different nearby countries, and following the recipe, is only one reason why his medicine is so popular. Other reasons include his mode of big thinking and open-mindedness to new ideas, as well as his moral character that makes him beloved among the population.



Sai Than Maung



5 Tigers traditional medicine

Sai Than Maung came from humble beginnings in a village not far from Kyaukme. His grandfather knew how to make some different kinds of medicines from plants, against stomach aches and other minor health problems, which he passed on to Sai Than Maung's father. His father continued the traditional practice but made medicine only for village people to use when they became sick. The medicine was given away for free for the common good. After Sai Than Maung and his 3 brothers were grown, the family began discussing selling their medicine, which was quite popular in the village. Sai

Than Maung and his brothers were more keen on doing this, although no one but Sai Than Maung believed that it could ever become popular beyond just the immediate area. As they were 5 brothers + father, they named the brand 5 Tigers, although Sai Than Maung always jokes with his own 5 children that they were the namesake. At first, they began selling the old man's medicine at a stand in Kyaukme's market (a brother of Sai Than Maung still runs such a stand today). Every morning at 4am, Sai Than Maung and his wife Ngwe Kyi went to the market to be selling their goods. Roads in and out of mountain villages were at this time treacherous and took hours to navigate. Luckily, Ngwe Kyi's grandmother gave them a house in Kyaukme, which is still their home to this day. They sold medicine like this for a few years, all losing faith in the endeavor except for Sai Than Maung.



Outside of the market in Kyaukme



5 Tigers factory

The quality of thinking big is what sets Sai Than Maung apart. His wife said he was always like this as a child, when they were schoolmates. Under Sai Than Maung's control, the business quickly grew extremely huge. His son Sai Lao stated that this was because of the strict adherence to quality as well as a widespread marketing strategy that his father used. Unfortunately he was unable to recall the marketing from his young age. Sai Than Maung's big thinking was also reflected in his contribution to my project. In June 2014, we wanted to arrange a river cleanup, and held a meeting with several heads of NGOs (about 20 or so). They discussed the prospect with us for a few hours, but ultimately were too fixated on limitations, and sometimes had unrealistic expectations – that a certain hefty sum was needed, that it might be looked upon negatively by people, that the government has to agree and it might be difficult to

convince them. We left the meeting disheartened, but Mo Noon, Sai Than Maung's personal assistant, had also been at the meeting, and approached us afterwards: "If you really want to clean the river, talk to my boss," she said. We took her advice and approached him about the idea. He seemed to like it and we were told he would discuss it with some friends and get back to us on the exact date and time. 3 days later, everything was arranged! All the aspects of health, safety, and strategy were already planned out – there were health organizations giving out preventive measures and on call for emergencies, government officials chaperoning the event, and the people were guided what to do for the work to transgress in a smooth fashion by Sai Than Maung himself.



**Volunteers at the river cleanup**



**Sai Than Maung supervising the cleanup**

Sai Than Maung doesn't close himself up to opportunities, even if they seem far-fetched for the current situation. When I held a presentation with several town government members about my ideas for a waste organization and how I believed it would benefit the people, he was always taking notes. He takes inexperienced, unqualified people seriously, and that's how he can also get new input. He always takes pictures and videos of events he believes important. And at a time when cell phones of a basic nature cost the equivalent of \$10,000, he saw beyond the price at the possibilities for doing better business.

He treats his workers with respect, and mostly employs disadvantaged people, usually villagers, and women with children are allowed to bring their children to work. Additionally, everyone receives free cooked lunch of a high quality, and accommodation is provided to those that need it. His policy is also strict but understanding – for instance, when a worker is doing the job incorrectly or becomes demotivated, they are always kindly encouraged to work diligently and never thrown out as an expendable worker.

Beyond these qualities, it may be his moral character that propels him to succeed. He gives back to the people and is understanding of their poverty, as he himself originated from poor conditions. His business model includes a 25% donation of any profits to charities, and 20% goes to support of his village as well. He has helped found some elementary schools, and donates notebooks and other school supplies to impoverished children. He is a devout Buddhist and also donates 20% of his wealth to temples, the monks of which are mostly orphans and poor children.

His innovation is reflected in those qualities: his open-mindedness to new possibilities – in which he takes time to consider new ideas and sees not just risks but gains – and how he deals with people, treating everyone with respect and attention regardless of qualifications and the trust and kindness he exhibits to others, especially those in disadvantageous situations. His innovative nature may have been intrinsic, as he was always a big thinker according to his wife, and his pursuit of his ideas despite his poor conditions may have been motivated by the desire to rise out of those conditions to be able to help others in need because of his sympathy and give back to society to improve it.

## Case Study #2: Phyu Hsin Win

Phyu Hsin Win is a true businesswoman. Although it is less common for women to own businesses than men, she was always undeterred in her pursuits to form her own businesses. The 42-year old Shan woman grew up in Kyaukme and speaks Burmese, but not Shan. Her English is good for Myanmar people, and she has her own English learning center, the Crown English Learning Centre. She also has her own jewelry design business, and recently formed the town's only travel agency, Royal Hills Travel and Tours. She is now working on her next project, a hotel in the style of a traditional Myanmar house.



Phyu Hsin Win and daughter



Phyu Hsin Win's Travel Agency

Phyu Hsin Win is innovative in that she sees needs that are not filled by the current resources in the town, and acts on that creativity, not only alone, but in a way that pulls together the efforts of many competent people to make it work. As the daughter of a town government official and successful tea trader, her parents were able to help her kick-start her ideas and let her potential shine. Business-oriented thinking also seems to run in the family, as her sister also owns her own business, a children's clothing store next to their home, and her brother a solar panel company in Yangon. Her husband is deceased shortly after their only daughter's birth due to contracting illness. Therefore she has worked alone on pursuing and presenting her ideas to would-be partners, with great success. It could be that she is naturally convincing, or her creativity is appealing to potential investors with its practicality for being achieved.

To be innovative, one needs to have new ideas. But for those ideas to come into being, they must fill a need. Phyu Hsin Win based her ideas on needs. For her English school, she founded it for her daughter to have good English classes. English is not taught in a way to encourage speaking the language in Myanmar schools. The students only learn the meanings of words and most often focus on reading and writing. There are private English speaking classes after school, but from teachers often without the best English training. As Phyu Hsin Win's daughter was good in her English classes and she believed good knowledge of English was important, she wanted to support and encourage her daughter to learn the language well. Therefore, she founded a language school in a house that belonged to their family, and hired only very adept English speakers, either Myanmar people that learned English from experience with foreigners (often tour guides) or foreign teachers themselves, including 6 Americans. Her center is now one of the most successful and famous in the town.



### Teaching at the Crown English Learning Center

For her travel agency, she saw that many tourists came to Kyaukme to trek but had to organize everything themselves as advice on trekking tours was not offered by an intermediary. Individual tour guides with different experience levels, qualifications, and personalities met with tourists to advise them on the possibilities and often to get business from them. But there was no reliable way for the tourists to know which tour guide was the best choice for them in terms of safety and experience, as well as personality (which counts for a lot if one will spend the next few days with someone). A few years ago there was even a tour guide in Kyaukme that raped a tourist. And the guides – which are all just local people coming down from the mountains to try to make a living by showing foreigners around – may have different knowledge of areas to visit, so tourists don't have a comprehensive listing of options with just one guide. Phyu Hsin Win saw all of this lack of comprehensive information on the options, and founded a

travel agency, which she also had encouragement and inspiration from her brother to do. Beyond just providing tourists with choice and safety though (also in the way that she would be able to contact the tour guides in the mountains in case of emergency and have daily checkups that everything is going all right – especially important in times where rebels fight the Burmese army in some secluded mountain spots), the travel agency also protects the tour guides themselves. The only spot where the tour guides were likely to get customers was the town’s previously single hotel, owned by the corrupt mayor. The mayor then discriminated against some tour guides and even threatened them. He also created contracts for some tour guides to be able to only go to his hotel, and for the rest he wouldn’t allow them any customers, even if they were famous and experienced. So by working through the travel agency, they are also guaranteed a fairer share of customers and wages. Phyu Hsin Win’s agency is also very successful and has much business from travelers that want to plan their trips with more security – not just in terms of personal safety, but a guarantee of what they’ll be doing and where they’ll be going that they know they would enjoy, and skipping all the time at the beginning involving finding a tour guide and planning a route. She also collaborates with travel agencies in Mandalay and Yangon, and many existing tour guides and hotels in the town for this enterprise.



Royal Hills trekking photo



Phyu Hsin Win with tour guide and tourist

It could be that Phyu Hsin Win was lucky to be in the position to be able to start her businesses without worrying too much about capital investment, and that she was exposed to some ideas in Yangon when she studied there, for instance for her jewelry business. But she is creative in her own way, and without needing money, she also just enjoys starting businesses and providing good services to people where she sees there’s a need. Her personal creativity and passion shined because she was not poor,

but maybe her pure enjoyment also is the biggest factor in her creativity. She is unique in what ideas she brings to the town. For instance, her idea of a traditional hotel is new in the town, and she is founding it because she wants foreigners to experience what it is like to be inside a typical bamboo house, and even learn to cook Myanmar food. Her example could show that one way innovation can be brought about is through the availability of time and a basic level of security from which to start developing and working on ideas unobstructed by basic needs, but that creativity itself may also be independent of all those and just feed off those circumstances to be realized.

## Case Study #3: Daw Matandan Tui

The middle-aged Daw Matandan Tui has a strong personality. With only the equivalent of \$10 in her pocket, she came to Kyaukme 20 years ago. There she saw that recyclables such as plastic bottles, aluminum cans, glass flasks, and cardboard – all new consumer packaging products for Myanmar at the very beginning of their appearance in the country – were being thrown away like all other trash. So she started the first, and most successful, recycling shop in Kyaukme, where recyclables are brought and then prepared for sending to recycling factories in Mandalay. She even has partnerships with recycling collectors – mostly poor women – that provides them with bicycles as a mode of transportation for collecting recyclables in exchange for them selling only to her shop. The infrastructure of recycling persons she built up is so vast that she even appointed some workers the recycling heads of the town's various blocks, under which the collectors in those blocks are responsible to. She and her husband bought their own truck to carry items to Mandalay, unlike most other shops that pay a fee to passing transportation trucks. And the concept of recycling is so ingrained in her that she used certain unrecyclable materials such as less pure glass as construction material mixed with bricks when building her home and shop. In fact, her shop was so successful that she even expanded and built a second shop in another town a few hours away, where her daughter lives.



Daw Matandan Tui



Daw Matandan Tui's shop

Perhaps her success also relies on her dedication to her values. She is a devout Buddhist, but unfortunately also intolerant of other religions. She even asked her son to immediately leave his ex-Muslim girlfriend and marry a girl of her choosing in another city. So the son obeyed and drove to the other city to marry that girl on that day. A more positive example is that every year she pays for all of her many workers to make a religious pilgrimage to another town, a hefty sum that she believes is worth donating for this cause. This focus on her beliefs may reflect her general tendency to push through with an idea she has, good or bad, but less undeterred because of that concentration on it. This mentality may have helped her with pushing through with her idea to form a recycling shop in a time where this was a completely new idea for the town and when women had even less power in society. No matter the obstacles, as she truly believed in her idea and in the concept of recycling in itself, she was able to gain success, and no other of the now 10-20 recycling shops in Kyaukme was able to gain her level of success and expanse.

## Limitations

As with any research, there were constraints on the information that could be amassed and the connections to potential interviewees that could be made. Sai Than Maung was not in the town at the time of the research, and so his 26-year old son Sai Lao was interviewed about him. However, he also did not know the specifics of his father's mentality on first starting the business. His wife Ngwe Kyi was extremely busy at this time and unavailable for interviewing further on the topic. Even Sai Lao was busy, so there was only one interview session of 2 hours. Phyu Hsin Win did not always understand the interview questions well, or understand the concept of creativity in itself, so some of her responses were superficial. Daw Matandan Tui was interviewed through an interpreter, and although his English was very good, there is already some room for miscommunication as there was an intermediary. At this time we did not refine the interview questions to get at deeper questions of innovation, so mostly factual information was gathered rather than her own insights into innovative thinking. We had found another towns person that other locals view as innovative when conducting the research, Shwe Aa. He is an elderly man that had the idea to create shoes out of tires, and he is famous for this in the town. However, he is mute, and when we tried to interview him, the people closest to him did not know how to answer about how he had such new ideas. As we were in Kyaukme for only a few days, it was difficult to find other people to interview, as our sources in Kyaukme did not have other ideas of people who are innovative, nor did they even really grasp the concept of novelty, innovation, or creativity, so we relied on my past experiences to hint at people that were special and more interesting to interview. Of course this then is tied more to my own past experiences, and possibly to waste management in itself, although the people presented are also quite famous in the town.

Originally the research was to be coupled with another waste project I was carrying out this August, "Students Take Power" from the Waste-Free Myanmar Foundation (which is actually an organization that I am founding in Kyaukme to run projects regarding environmental and waste management solutions). The project was to be a workshop on waste management and leadership practices targeting young people to inspire activism on societal issues, and some of the activities included interviewing townspeople on waste practices and on innovation. However, the project had many unanticipated logistical complications along the way, including the leave of almost all team members due to various individual reasons, and the lack of students for the project in its original location of Kyaukme. Just a few days before the project was due to start, my project partner informed me that through connections of her network of acquaintances, she was

able to get in touch with an organization in the nearby town of Lashio that agreed to arrange students and location for our project. We then shifted project location and modified the original activities and timetable to suit the new situation, which included less team members and less English proficiency of the students (most spoke no English, and we had to hire an interpreter). Therefore it was not logistically possible for the students to conduct town interviews on innovation, as much more complicated training on this specific topic would have been required and was outside the scope of the modified program (indeed, it would have been much above the complexity of the shortened program). My project partner and I then agreed that it was best to conduct the interviews in Kyaukme, where we had some contacts that could direct us to some innovators to interview. However, my project partner had to leave after only a few days due to a visa issue, and around the same time a friend meeting me in Myanmar became extremely ill, and so I was preoccupied entirely with that concern until the date when I also was set to leave Myanmar. Due to all these external factors beyond our control, we had less time and resources than planned for carrying out the research, and we also needed to modify our approach. However, I truly believe that the individuals outlined in the case studies are true innovators and that their stories can shed some light on how innovation can be brought about in developing communities.



**Reese Caliman and Bopha Sean in Kyaukme**