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MYANMAR

CHILDREN FIND HELP, EDUCATION AND HOPE IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMME

Imagine a little girl who knows there will not be enough food for dinner, who has watched her parents get sick because the family could not afford a doctor, and whose days are often spent scrubbing clothes, raising a baby brother, struggling with house chores and selling vegetables around the village lanes. Hard to believe? But for Eitar, these are the facts of life.

Twelve-year-old Ma Eitar (not her real name) of Bawga Bala village in Kyimindine township, which is five minutes across Haling River, is one of many children in the village who is no longer in school. Eitar would gladly walk to school and learn, but her mother needs her badly at home. Chances were that Eitar would grow up illiterate. Her future? In many ways, disastrous. Coming from a poor family, she realized she had to work to support the family.

Like Eitar, many children in the village were pulled out of school to help their families cope with financial hardship. They faced an uncertain future until they joined the EXCEL (Extended and Continuous Education and Learning) programme, implemented by UNICEF and partners to provide vulnerable and out-of-school children with essential education and life skills to prepare for the future.

For many children in this area, EXCEL is their first opportunity to get an education. Since the programme's teaching hours are flexible, students have time for both household chores and classes. Eitar and her friends are now back in the classroom instead of helping out at home all day. "I am glad that my mother let me attend this programme so I can continue learning," says Eitar, with a big smile.

"Our nomadic way of life meant I could not afford to send my three children to school," says Eitar's mother, Daw Myint, 56 years old. "All my children, including Eitar, had to leave school after fourth or fifth grade because of financial problems. It is very difficult for us to make ends meet when my husband is a day labourer and I sell some snacks at the village school, which makes only a small amount of money. Now my daughter Eitar has joined the course. I'm relieved. I do believe that getting an education will prepare her to make the most of her life," she adds.

Not only does the curriculum allow Eitar and other children catch up with their academic studies, it also provides practical training in decision-making, self-protection and communication skills to meet the challenges life has yet to offer. Parents, teachers and village elders are all mobilized to support the EXCEL programme. "This is not an easy task but I'm happy because I do believe children will become more self-confident, can make better-informed decisions and contribute positively to their communities," says 29-year-old Kyaw Htay, an active participant in the village programme. Despite various obstacles, trained young educators travel to each village three times a week to meet and work with the children for a two-hour EXCEL session, often in the evenings. More than 50 per cent are girls and most of them are working children.

"After completion of the programme, the children can always go back to regular school if their family's financial situation allows," says educator Than Than Mon, 24 years old. "EXCEL is like a bridge to a better future for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children."

"I believe I can have a brighter future from the knowledge I am gaining here. Moreover, the care, attention and warmth I receive from my very kind facilitators makes me feel confident," says Eitar, with the shining light of hope in her eyes. "Before I joined this out-of-school classroom, I thought that my world was dull. There was no hope, no bright future. But I have to say that a whole new life has begun now."

Eitar will no longer miss school bells or the school uniform.