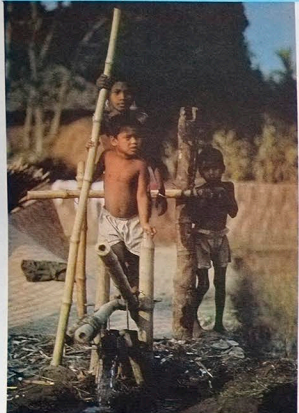


Bangladesh - British aid and NGOs bring relief and hope to troubled land



Children operating a treadle pump -- a small revolution which makes winter rice a possible crop in a dry season -- funded by the ODA.



Amongst the many ODA/SCF-supported income-generation schemes is support for fishing, with aid to buy boats or nets.



The SCF feeding programme. Sacks of rice and lentils are distributed to those most in need. A gird system has been devised so that the food goes to the right people from January to March 15-18,000 people were fed at a cost of £400,000 from £150,000 provided by the ODA.

Bangladesh has more than its fair share of natural disasters with tornados, cyclones and floods. 1988 saw the worst floods in living memory with over 1,000 dead and some 23 million made homeless.

The British Government responded with £8 million of immediate disaster relief, including food aid, and a further £17.5m for longer-term rehabilitation. This included a grant of £2.5m announced by Overseas Development Minister Mr. Chris Patten to support rehabilitation work by NGOs.

But what happens to that ODA money? How is it spent? Tim Malyon, a photojournalist engaged by Save the Children Fund, visited SCF operations in February. He saw at first hand how SCF and ODA have combined to make full and effective use of the latter's £480,000 grant to bring relief and hope to a beleaguered section of the community.

Here he provides us with his personal impressions of what he saw.

All photos by Tim Malyon

Take a pump bicycle ride north from the SCF's River Project, first established after the 1974 flood. Pedal along raised embankments above paddy fields freshly planted with winter rice. Water glistens in the afternoon sun. You have to brake to avoid an income-generation scheme -- a chicken and her fluffly brood pecking in the dust. For sound there is the thud-thud of treadle pumps working in the fields.

Treadle pumps? They're foot-operated irrigation pumps, small revolutions which render winter rice crop possible during this season of no rain. No longer need farmers and landless labourers be totally dependent on the monsoon rice crop, so vulnerable to floods. In 1987 200 pumps were handed out in a loan scheme to landless labourers as part of the River Project. The labourers sank 30 x 40 feet tubewells on farmers' lands and sharcropped the harvest, splitting it 50-50.

Enter one of the need huts. Mothers cuddle their children, sitting cross-legged along the walls. The project doctor starts his rounds amidst a hubbub of talking and shouting and crying. A three month old child, born immediately after the flood, is not crying -- she is lying silently in her landless mother's lap, her mouth open in a cry which has long since faded; she is too weak, and all seems black and hopeless. She's incurably blind -- her pupils dissolved -- the direct consequence of vitamin A deficiency.

What will become of her? "She will become a beggar, what else can she do?" the doctor replies.

Her name is Asma Kaktun. If she had received just one dose of Vitamin A during her short seeing life, today she would have eyes. One dose lasts six months and costs 1.5p.

That short bicycle ride, for me, illustrates the swing between hope and the despair that is rural Bangladesh. Within the River Project boundaries vitamin A deficiency has been eradicated.

Pump and installation cost around £12 and 98% of the loans were repaid within the first year. In 1988 the project distributed 2,000 treadle pumps through interest-free loans, funded by a grant of £23,000 from the ODA, transforming both landscape and the lives of many landless labourers, who make up 60 to 70 per cent of the population of this area.

Leave the fertile fields behind you and pedal on until you enter a dry and desolate landscape beyond the River Project boundaries. There is a square of huts, an SCF children's clinic and intensive feeding centre, funded by the ODA. It's just been opened -- you'll see why.

Malnourished

This area lost two-thirds of its land in the 1988 flood. An SCF survey in December 1988 found 40% of the children were malnourished -- three months after

of rice and lentils for distribution. The programme from January to the end of March fed 15,000 to 18,000 people, costing around £100,000 of the £150,000 provided by the ODA for feeding, repair work and agricultural re-habilitation.

Rahima Alamgir and her family will be amongst those fed. She came to the SCF clinic in January with her 18 month old boy suffering from severe malnutrition. He was admitted with his mother to the children's intensive feeding centre attached to the clinic.

Rahim will automatically be given a card entitling the whole family to rice and lentil rations every two weeks in Bangladesh. His situation is typical. She has three other children, the eldest a 15-year-old boy. One child died at three months from acute diarrhoea and dehydration, another dropped at 18 months.

She has no land, no cattle, no chickens. She's even sold the family rice bowl, and she is £11 in debt -- to her a huge sum. The current local interest rate is 15% a month, 20% in some places. Her husband borrowed £5 to buy a small fishing net before the flood and which he subsequently had to sell for £3 to buy food -- borrowing for food caused the rest of the debt.

Lost wages

Fishing can be very profitable, but not during this dry season when the rivers are too low. Husband and son can each earn about 25p a day on agricultural labour, but they only find work about one day in four and the husband has no sack. The family needs about 30p a day to live. There is no chance of the eldest son attending school -- they can't afford to take the child to school. Just like blind Asma's par-

ents, they can't find enough work right through from the September floods to the following April. When the main planting season begins. After the floods farmers have insufficient resources to employ much labour. So food distribution fills the gap. It should stop people starving, and having to sell off desperately needed resources -- like Rahima's husband's fishing net.

Tricky selection

When SCF boats arrive at the distribution centre, people are already converging by foot and by boat from the surrounding villages. This food is targeted at the vulnerable and the needy so they require cards to receive their rations.

Watching over the whole operation is Quasr Ghassabuliki -- "Ghash" -- the SCF Project manager, a commanding live-wire of a man, dedicated and crackling with ideas. He refuses many requests for cards, some genuine some not. Local leaders demand batches of six or seven to hand out to their people -- and are rebuffed.

Selection is tricky. The Fund employs locals in the village clinics and feeding centres who, with the population and help conduct surveys for the initial feeding selection. They are supervised by managers from outside the area to make sure they are not improperly influenced.

Ghash reckons candidly that 80-85% of the food goes to the right mouths. That's probably as good as you'll find in an emergency short-term programme like this one.

Emergency food distribution requires much more than just loading a boat with food and sending it out to the countryside. It needs good community contracts and participation if it is to be really effective. Distribution to the wrong people not only detracts from the needy, but can have a deleterious effect on the local economy.

As Ghash succinctly puts it: "If we have a long-term programme we need to know each other and every family, so we know who is needy and who is not."

Neighbours

Back at the River Project, Zahid Hussain has been SCF manager for 12 years and indeed knows who is needy.

"I know my neighbours," he asserts confidently.

During my visit he almost immediately knew when a boy from one of the local schools got on to a food-for-work scheme -- whereby people are paid for their work on community projects like building up raised paddy and flood refuges. The scheme was funded by the ODA to the tune of £180,000

for ten weeks from January to the end of March, when hopefully agricultural work became available once more.

Promising schemes

It is expensive -- but necessary -- aid, looking after the short and medium term and it helps to ensure that the long-term schemes, like the ODA-supplied treadle pumps, have a chance to take effect.

Zahid has also given out interest free loans for rickshaws, goats, a barber's shop, and to fishermen whatever is suggested and looks promising.

"These are small things," he says. "They cost little but they bring enormous benefit to people."

Zahid has strong views on the way forward.

"Always there will be floods in Bangladesh. In bad years people lose their crops and their houses, and animals are washed away."

... "We have to live with the floods, develop new techniques for adjusting... we must prepare for the floods, keep reserves, to ride out the bad times..."

But the floods are not that severe every year. They also bring much needed water for agriculture, so that way they are good. We have to live with the floods. We have to develop new techniques for adjusting ourselves."

Long term development projects can improve immediate emergency flood relief. And they can help to guard against floods before they ever arrive: distributing animal ponds, or 'parturis' to safeguard families who lose their pumps and must drink water from distributing seeds so families can start growing green leafy vegetables immediately the water starts to drop, and farmers can start employing labour; establishing emergency refuges and having boats available; so losses of life, livestock and property are minimised; health and education and widespread training of local healers and traditional birth attendants; income generation like treadle pumps to raise the level of prosperity of the community, afford a safety net of food and resources on which it can draw without being off-centred.

Real benefits

"We must prepare for the floods, keep reserves, so that we can ride out the bad times," concludes Zahid.

It may not be the whole answer, but it's a beginning.

Within the extensive aid resources made available to Bangladesh by the international aid community for large scale projects, let us not overlook the real benefits to individuals from such small scale projects as these. They deliver effective assistance direct to those most in need. There's not enough of them, however. Blind little Asma's village was on the wrong side of the project

boundary when she so desperately needed help. There should be no such wrong side, not in Bangladesh, not anywhere.

Destined to beg

If there were more treadle pumps and livestock and seeds and fishing nets, more families could earn and eat and care for their disabled, even in times of scarcity.

If every birth attendant and every healer knew about nutrition and vitamin A deficiency -- and could even give a 1.5p capsule to every child born -- then, perhaps, little Asma would not be blind -- or, at least, not destined to beg for the rest of her life.

Asma Kaktun - blind for life and destined to become a beggar. A 1.5p dose of vitamin A given soon after birth could have saved her sight.



Rickshaw transport -- an example of an income-generation scheme.



Carrying earth to build up causeways. This is an example of a 'food-for-work' scheme.