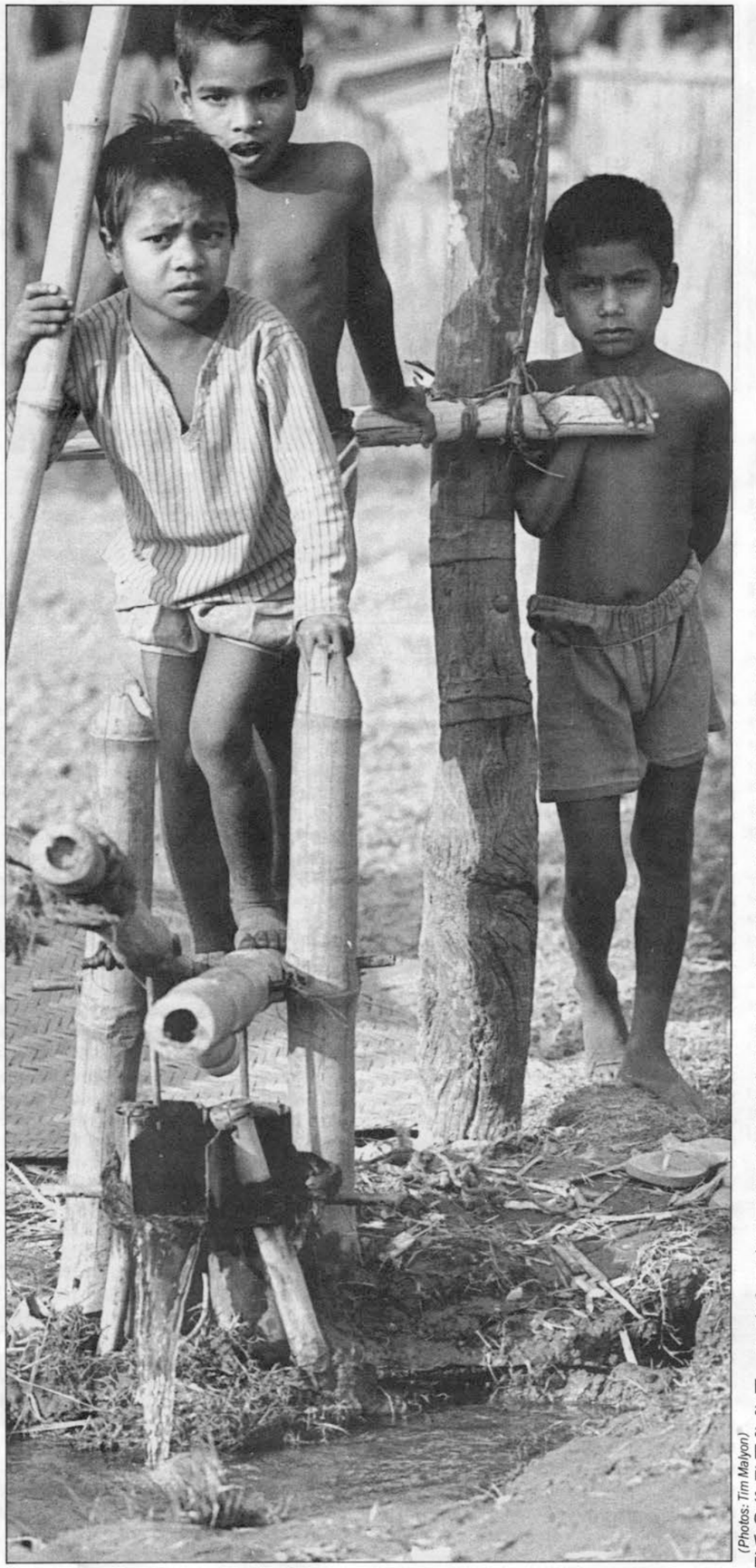


Treadle pumps are not hard to operate.

(Photos: Tim Malyon)

A TREADLE PUMP MEANS WINTER RICE

There are plans for a nev project in Bangladesh, at Shariatpur, converting an emergency relief scheme into a community development programme. We are also investigating ways of making SCF's resources stretch further. Tim Malyon takes a personal look.

Ride a bumpy bicycle out from the most northerly clinic of SCF's River project, first established after the 1974 flood. Peddle along raised embankments above paddy fields freshly planted with winter rice. Water glistens in the afternoon sun. You brake to avoid an income generation scheme, a chicken and her fluffy brood pecking in the dust. For sound there's the thud thud of treadle pumps working in the fields.

Treadle pump? It's a foot operated irrigation pump, a small and beautiful revolution which renders a 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. The River project handed out two hundred such pumps in 1987, in a loan scheme to landless labourers. The labourers sank 30-40 ft tubewells on farmers' lands and sharecropped the harvest, splitting it 50/50. Pump and installation cost about £12. Ninety-eight per cent of the loans were repaid within the year. In 1988 the project distributed two thousand treadle pumps by loan, transforming both landscape and the lives of many landless labourers, 60 to 70% of the population here.

Keep peddling. Leave those fertile paddy fields behind and enter a dry and desolate landscape beyond the River project boundaries. Ahead there's a square of huts, an SCF clinic and children's intensive feeding centre, just opened – you'll see why. This area lost two thirds of its land in the 1988 flood. An SCF survey in December 1988 found 40% of its children to be malnourished. In December? Three months after the flood? Too big a flood has a catastrophic immediate impact, carrying away lives, houses, livestock and crops. Then afterwards, there's no agricultural work, the farmers have no resources to employ labour, so the landless have no money to buy food, or must sell all to survive. Right up to April, when the next big agricultural cycle began, SCF had to continue emergency feeding and food for work programmes.

Come into the square, then one of the reed 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. He beckons. This 3-month-old child here, born immediately after the flood, is not crying. She's lying silently in her landless mother's lap. Her mouth stays open in a cry which has long since died. She's too weak, and all is black and hopeless. She's blind, incurably blind, her pupils dissolved, the direct consequence of vitamin A deficiency. What will happen to her? "She will become a beggar, what else can she do?" the doctor replies. Her name is Azma 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 1½p.

In that short bicycle ride is Bangladesh, the hope and bleak despair. Within the River project boundaries, vitamin A deficiency has been eradicated and the winter rice is growing. Outside, thirty thousand Azma Kaktuns go blind every year. There is a desperate urgency to do more.

Derek Douglas is a red-haired earthy Cumbrian who's spent eight of the last ten years in Bangladesh, most recently as second-in-charge in the Dhaka office. He speaks Bangla fluently.

"We work in very small areas. Our programmes affect 150,000 people directly. When you're talking about a hundred million people it makes a very small impact, and SCF just can't do any more. We don't have the resources to stretch any further."

What is the answer? "We need to change our outlook from longstanding programmes that affect a small community to trying to turn the programmes over in whatever form is appropriate to that community to run for itself. Then SCF can move into another area and set up a similar type of project that could be repeated in various areas throughout Bangladesh. So we are not using finance within one small demarcated area year after year, helping a very small percentage of the population when the problems are everywhere."

The proposed Shariatpur project is a chance to try something new. South of River project, in an area equally vulnerable to flooding, SCF has been running emergency relief programmes for six months during each of the last two years. In April last year it pulled out after the 1987 flood, only to come back in September when the '88 flood hit. Quazi Ghiasuddin, known as 'Giash', is project manager, a commanding live-wire, crackling with ideas. Already he's under pressure from the local people to stay. He'd like to, but not for ever, and he wants something left behind when he does go.

"I ask one question", he says "What happened here before SCF came? Where did people get their medical treatment for example? In most rural remote areas people go to the traditional local healers, traditional birth attendants, homeopathic doctors, and 'quacks'. What's the problem with that? The problem is, these people often don't have much skill or proper training to provide effective treatment. So if SCF moves into an area and tries to improve this local health system, by giving training, then these healers could provide improved health services to the community, but in the same way they are doing now. So SCF gives knowledge and the system remains, even if SCF decides to pull out." When Giash and I interviewed mothers in Shariatpur clinics, almost every one had been to a local medical practitioner of some kind before approaching SCF.

Many poor families use their loans to buy livestock.

As well as health, there's another vital component envisaged for Shariatpur – income generation. Those treadle pumps up at River project were distributed via loans, with 98% payback. John Morris is the new Bangladesh field director and spent five years with National Westminster Bank as a loans manager before joining SCF in 1985. He's looking into more widespread low interest loan schemes, with appropriate modifications. Take a group of five people, for instance, or five families. SCF lends them £100, for treadle pumps, or goats or rickshaws – they choose, they know best what makes money in their area. The £100 must be repaid over five years at 25% interest. Five per cent of this goes to SCF to cover running costs; 20% is compulsory savings. After five years, if all goes well, the borrowers have their pumps and livestock, plus the original loan which can be reinvested elsewhere.

And there's another twist to the scheme: no more than perhaps two people can borrow at any one time, or they must have paid back a certain percentage before anyone else can borrow. The group members thereby become each others' loan managers, each one aware that if his/her neighbour defaults, then he/she also suffers. The scheme virtually runs and polices itself. Similar ideas have already been tried by a Bangladesh agency, the Grameen Bank, with outstanding success. John Morris sums it up: "We provide access to resources and training. Then maybe in five years or so we could withdraw and leave in place systems which can continue without our involvement."

There's one more component envisaged for the Shariatpur project: an ongoing community development group, established with SCF help to plan and promote projects continuing after the Fund leaves. Giash is emphatic: "Societies and communities change. A community needs an organisation to help its people foresee what is happening. If we help create good leadership within the community, then that leadership can create leadership to follow it. If we leave them in a vacuum, there may not be any continuity. It's a crucial role for SCF to establish these organisations."

So where does this all leave blind little Azma Kaktun, 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. A big influx of international aid to Bangladesh is being considered, aimed at multi-billion pound 'technical fixes' for the floods – dams, barrages, dredging. Short of reafforesting the Himalayas such modern magic has its limits.

So let's not forget the small miracles, we need more of them, everywhere. If there were a huge international 'soft loan' scheme for treddle pumps and livestock and seeds and fishing nets (call it *The World Bank)* so 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, perhaps even could give a 1½p capsule of vitamin A to every child born; if, oh only if, then perhaps little Azma need not be blind, or at least not destined to beg for the rest of her life.

It's a dream, isn't it?●

A vitamin A capsule costing 1½p would have saved little Azma Kaktun's sight.

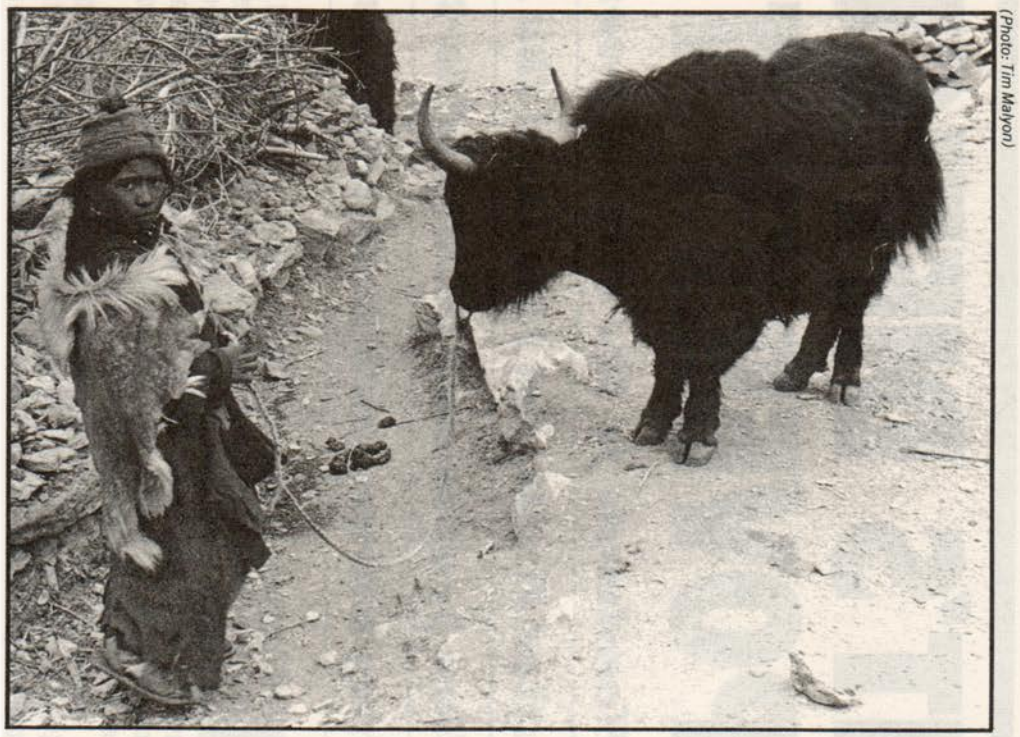
REACHING MORE CHILDREN WITH YOUR MONEY

Save the Children has always been a very practical organisation, working to achieve a tangible improvement in children's health and welfare. When planning our strategy for the next five years one of Overseas Director Hugh Mackay's paramount concerns was how to maximise the impact of our programme.

crease the amount of research we undertake. A product of former research, the weight-for-height chart which gives a quick and simple means of identifying malnourished children, is now being distributed worldwide through UNICEF. Future plans include re-structuring clinic services to make the best use of what are often infrequent visits by mothers and their children.

Neither research nor training can be put to good use if people do not have the supplies and equipment they need, so SCF will become more involved in related economic endeavours. Inputs will range from setting up revolving funds to provide pharmacies for poor communities (the small payments made by villagers are ploughed back to replenish stocks) to capitalising projects which communities would have no hope of setting up themselves.

The common factor linking all these strands of our work is an emphasis on working in partnership with individual governments to assist in developing programmes which will be responsive to local needs and compatible with local resources, so that the countries concerned will themselves be able to sustain these programmes in the long term – thus benefitting future generations of children.●



(Photo: Tim Malyon)

By helping to breed better draught cattle we are enabling communities in the Himalayan region of Ladakh to make the most of the stony soil and short growing season.

◆ WORK IN ASIA ◆

(Photo: Tim Malyan)

AN ASSET TO THE COMMUNITY

Sitting idly on a steep scree slope at 18,000 feet up in the Himalayas watching yaks and mountain goats graze on a high summer pasture against a backdrop of snow-capped peaks and azure blue sky may seem like a heavenly alternative to many of us town-bound creatures, says Jane Macaulay, wife of SCF's Field Director in Ladakh. But for the children of this remote region of northern India, however, herding is often a way of life offering little opportunity for an academic education.

Frequently in villages where there *is* a school building the teacher posted there finds the conditions too hard or the facilities too few to remain for long, so villages are often without a teacher, or health worker, or any professional 'incomer' for many months at a time. How then to ensure that teachers and medical personnel remain where they are most needed.

This was one of the problems which prompted Save the Children to set up the children's hostel in Leh, Ladakh in May 1985. The idea was that after being educated and trained in skills of their own choosing children originally from these remote areas would be more likely to return willingly to work amongst their own people than those who, as strangers to an area, often didn't even speak the same language as the villagers.

The children, 27 at present – 20 boys and 7 girls ranging from 9 to 16 years – have been selected from all corners of Ladakh through the Lions Club at Leh who are managing the hostel, which will eventually house 50 children. In each village the idea was discussed with the community as a whole who then suggested a child or children whom they felt would most benefit, both for themselves and in the long run for the home villages.

During the week children attend the government schools and after school they are given extra teaching in English and Urdu. They return home as often as possible, but for some children this means a two-week walk over rough tracks and they can only get back to their villages once or twice a year.

In November 1985 children and staff moved from their temporary accommodation into a locally designed, custom-built hostel heated by solar panels – temperatures here can drop to −30°C in winter. It was constructed with a grant from the British Columbia SCF and the Canadian International Development Agency. The building is functional and comfortable both winter and summer, thanks to its south facing location and the walls which absorb the sun's rays and then circulate the warmth at night. Hot running water comes from a series of jerry-cans tilted under glass to gather maximum daytime heat.

From a purely personal point of view I have never seen 27 pairs of such bright alert eyes, quick brains and willing limbs assembled together. As a group they are a joy to be with and I look forward to the time when their energy, enthusiasm and intelligence will be put to work to improve conditions for the whole community in their remote mountain homes.

● *Since this article was written the number of children in the hostel has increased to 40 and such is the enthusiasm amongst the village people that discussions are already under way to work out plans for a second hostel in another area of Ladakh.*