

# The Wrong Sort Of Giving

A heart-breaking insight into the life of a child beggar. By Karen Hoob.

Getting off the bus at the Zia Airport with a few loose taka in your pocket, the most natural thing to do is give it to one of the street kids, begging with grubby hands and big eyes. But your kindness, that easy generosity, is what keeps the family business of begging going from generation to generation and traps children in the cycle of poverty.

We had hitched a lift with the Emirates crew back to the airport and where we would meet Maria, founder of the Dhaka Project, for a tuk-tuk ride to The Project. Along with my 14 year old daughter Penny and her friend Sophie, I was there to help for a week at The Dhaka Project. The Project runs a school for 200 children, provides English lessons and skills training programs for their parents and has successfully saved more than 55 families from the slums of Dhaka and given the skills and knowledge to make a better life.

The buses arrive like clockwork, every morning delivering soft hearted crew with a few unspent allowance takas in their pockets. The kids, small enough to squeeze between the bars in the barrier fence, mingle shyly amongst the crew as they wait for their luggage, extend their limp little hands, put on their best doe eyes and plead in soft little voices for money for food.

Arif, a bright eyed and very persistent little boy, was there that morning. He ignored Maria as she shoed him away. He ignored us, seasoned volunteer veterans of four days, even when Sophie told him "No! There is no need!" in Bengali. He even ignored the policeman until the policeman raised his baton. That baton was Arif's ticket for a ride in our tuk-tuk and a visit to The Project.

Penny and Sophie, wide eyed, were pleased to see a "rescue" in action but this is not the end of the story and don't read on if you like happy endings!

Back at The Project, Arif, who we guess is around 7 years old, recounts his day. He gets up early every morning to take a 50 minute bus ride to the airport for the peak begging hours when cabin crew arrive. After the last crew bus has departed at about 1pm he makes his way home with anywhere from 100 to 500 taka in his pocket (6 to 25dhs).

Arif is an alert and clever boy, you don't need an interpreter to know that. There is a confidence and awareness about him that many street kids have but there is also a devilish intelligence that sets him apart. Maria saw in him a child with potential that needed to be at school.

We guessed, since Arif appeared to be a significant breadwinner for the family, that the challenge lay in convincing the parents of the same thing.

Arif lives in a semi-permanent slum area along the river, just past the bird market and behind a row of ramshackle lean-to shops fronts. Every year during the monsoon season this area floods and Arif and his extended family move to another slum on



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higher ground.

He led us past a line of corrugated, airless, shacks built along a narrow muddy track. We stepped around makeshift kitchen fireplaces at the doorways on one side and tried to avoid curtained "bathrooms" on the other riverside of the track.

We walked past a young couple and their naked baby, lying completely motionless on the bare dirt floor of their slum. Stricken with typhoid, the neighbours are in no position to help. Maria made a mental note to send The Project doctor.

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A couple of foreigners following a little kid through the slums attracts quite a crowd and by the time we reached Arif's house there are some 20 curious faces standing with us at the doorway.

We are greeted by Arif's, young, brightly dressed and smiling mother holding a young baby. Ushered into the windowless iron hut, our eyes adjust and we find ourselves in an cramped but orderly room, furnished with bed, bench, TV and glass fronted cabinet neatly stacked with sheets, blankets, photos

and crockery. Along the walls are shelves lined with gleaming, unused cooking pots and ornaments.

Arif's mother switches on a fan which helps little to relieve the stifling sauna-like temperature in the room. Not helped at all with our twenty curious followers cramming in also.

It is horrifying, but hovels like this all over Dhaka have landlords. The average weekly wage from Arif's begging pays the monthly rent. This leaves three week earnings for food and other essential items like his mother's mobile phone.

For a few years Arif's cute, cheeky face will be the best asset the family owns. Then it will be his little sister's turn, now just a babe in arms. His mother was sent to beg at the airport by her mother and looking at her now, smiling at us with perfect teeth and bright eyes, it is not hard see that she too would have been very successful in pulling heart and purse strings.

Also, just like Arif, a foreigner offered to take her away from the airport begging and send her to school. Her mother would not do without the income and Arif's mother was too young to understand the chance she had been given. Now some twenty years, Maria is standing in the same house offering her son the chance she was denied.

Among all the goodies that begging can buy, we wait for Arif's mother to decline the offer. We are ready with new, convincing arguments and offers to help but it is unnecessary. It is agreed that Arif can attend The Dhaka Project school but only if his aunt, a pixie like girl not much older than Arif, can also attend. The girl has a club foot and the prospects, Arif's mother knows, are not good for her.

Elated, we leave and look forward to seeing Arif and his little aunt at school the next day.

And we do. We see Arif and little Aunt for two days and then not for the rest of the week.

Maria will try to make sure that Arif returns to school but unfortunately this story is unlikely to have a happy ending.

The sad reality is that it is probably too late to save Arif. He has been lulled into believing that the generous handouts he takes home everyday is all he needs.

He is 7 years old. How can you convince a free-roaming street kid with cash in his pocket that it is better to go to school everyday for his long term future.

How can you explain that in just a few years when he is no longer cute his earnings will go down and that by the time he is an un-kept looking adolescent he will appear threatening to some young woman who patted him on the head and gave him spare taka.

And then what? No education. No begging income. Just street smarts and an eye for quick money. Begging is a business that is taught from generation to generation. Mother to child. Unfortunately, there is no future in this family business once you grow too tall and lose your chubby cheeks. There is no place for spotty teenagers or able bodied young people. These kids will eventually have to leave the family business and find other street work that pays.

Please consider giving your spare taka to The Dhaka Project and give to the children in the right sort of way!