



# THE DHAKA PROJECT

## NOOSHA'S FEEDBACK

### Sunday 6 January

Maria calls me at about 6 to get up and drive out on the truck to meet a new, impressive experience.

After a 6 hour drive together with Russell, Firoz's brother and 2 other guys that work for Maria, we reach the village of Sripur, where we are going to hand out the blankets. A crowd gathers shortly after our arrival and before I know it, we are surrounded by a mass of poverty stricken people.

The struggle of life is very visible in their skinny bodies, their bloodshot eyes and their torn and dirty clothes. My smiles of sympathy are once again answered with the warmest and most welcoming smiles, showing broken and rotten teeth, stained red by the habit of chewing beetle-nut, a habit I first got acquainted with during my volunteering in Papua New Guinea, some 12 years back. I was told that chewing the beetle nut, packed with a beetle leaf, lime and some other herb, gives a high. I guess that is what one needs when living under these conditions. This struggle to survive yet another day, every single day of their lives is the reality to more than 1 billion people in the world. Just imagine waking up in the morning and facing the same torment that left you feeling weak and exhausted the day before, 365 days a year, without any break.

Not the breath of fresh air, not the crack of yummy smelling, freshly washed white bed-linen, no, nothing like that, instead you wake up in a shed containing 1 room only, which houses your entire family on a wooden or stone "bed" with rugs. Hard as the stone itself, because a mattress is for the rich, the walls are no more than dried mud, or if you're lucky and relatively wealthy, they might be made of a steel plate. Warmth is only provided by the bodies of the other family members who all share the "bed".

The crowds gathering are staring at me, what a strange appearance I must be for them.

Here I am, tall blonde woman, dressed Bangla, but by no means comparable to them. Kids start to laugh and giggle, the youngest burst in tears of fright. What a sensation! People just stare at me, some smiling, most just staring. If they'd had a camera, they'd be taking loads of pictures of me. So that's what it feels like when all those tourists visit your country and stick their cameras up your face to catch your exotic looks! Well, as much as I am now feeling a bit of shame for all the staring and photographing I have been doing all these years, I think it is quite funny. I joke to the guys that every Western woman who needs to boost her ego should come here. No lack of male attention here!!! Hahaha.

Once the crowd has gathered, they are all lined up in categories; women and children first, older men second and the other men last. The village elderly has provided a list of



## THE DHAKA PROJECT

the poorest who are to receive the blankets. These people have been given a piece of paper with their name on it and some form of 'not to be copied' marking, which they have to hand over to receive the blanket. It works very efficiently and within 2 hours we have distributed about 2000 blankets here. Time to move on to the next village, Manikhat, for another 1000 blankets.

When we get there, we find a similar scene, a growing crowd of very poor people, eager to receive a blanket to stay warm at night.

It may be hard to imagine the necessity, but being here in January, I can tell that a warm winter jacket isn't a luxury here at night and living in a shed with a night temperature of about 10 degrees makes a shivering night without the comfort of a something as simple as a blanket,

a bare basic commodity in our societies of the developed world.

For these people:

Finally, a piece of luxury Finally a night to be spent in the comfort of warmth.

Just looking at the gratitude in their faces makes your heart stop for a while, thinking about all the things we take for granted every day, spending our consumptive lives without a single thought about what life is like on the other side of the scale.

In sharp contrast to the well organized method of distribution used in Sripur, we find a growing chaos here. 3 Hours after we got there, not even 20% has been distributed. The crowd just keeps growing and the noise becomes so overwhelming that it starts to get a bit threatening. Darkness falls and we are surrounded by shouting people, stretching out their arms to get a gift. Since there are many more people than blankets, it is no option to just hand them out to all those present. The village elderly keeps trying by calling the names of those entitled to a blanket, but the noise is such that no one can hear him. When we find ourselves in total darkness and still not even 30% distributed, we decide to pull out. This is not going to work. A very touch decision, but the only one to be made. This situation proves what the development literature writes, giving out freebees is not the always the best thing to do, as it brings out the greed in all humans, regardless the social status. It is painful to see, especially since you'd want to help all those surrounding you, but incapacitated by number of gifts to hand out we have to pull out, leaving so many empty handed. I need to withdraw and pull out my iPod, find a spot on the truck between the cartons and just sit there staring, trying to give this overwhelming experience a spot in my heart, as my emotions are running a-wire on me.

As we pull out, the people start to jump away and become slightly violent. I am glad we can go, as I have gotten a bit frightened. But what to do now? We still have about 700 blankets left on the truck. Firoz's brother, Shahalam, and Russell decide we stop at another village on the way to had out the remaining blankets. Shahalam thinks of a



## THE DHAKA PROJECT

great system upon arrival. All the people are to cue up and sit down. Here too, women, children and elderly first as we have only a limited number of blankets to give. All are to remain seated after they get their blanket. Within the hour we are out of blankets and can leave with a feeling of relief. Back towards Sripur for a village meal at Shahalam and Firoz's mother's and then onwards back to Uttara, where we arrive at 3AM. What a day! One that will go down memory lane and will be thought of and spoken about often.

Anoesjka Timmermans

### **Saturday 5 January 2008**

Today I went out with Nayan to distribute shoe boxes filled with gifts from the children of the Dubai British School, an activity they repeated after its success last year. A pile of colourful boxes was awaiting me as I entered the school building. The children had no clue what was coming to them. The pre-school children received the gifted boxes and were not to open them until they got home. As there were not enough boxes to give to all the children in the school, Maria had decided to open all the boxes and divide the gifts evenly between all the children. They were so excited! My task was to take picture of the children receiving all the goodies. A bundle of smiles and laughs roared the building. Wherever I came with the camera, I could expect loads of hugs and kisses.

We yelled: Thank You Children of Dubai!!

When I got back to the guesthouse, Maria and Florence were running around being busy and not talking to me about the necessities of the project, I felt brushed aside and a bit useless whilst I also felt that I could contribute in many ways. Late in the afternoon I showed Maria, Firoz and Florence what I have been doing in the north of Thailand in terms of a poverty alleviation project. In that project women create slightly adjusted ethnic products as a secondary income, for which they are paid per finished item. The outcome after a year and a half of hard work is fantastic and the same could be done here.

This opened the doors to Maria and her team and now the road opened for inclusion of my skills in the Project.

One of the issues not yet solved is the sourcing of a supplier for school uniforms. Florence has started the sourcing, but went to shops and suppliers of materials.

As a business owner in the production of toys and decorative items, both commercially in the world of manufacturing in China and in a poverty alleviation project, I have experience that can benefit the project, so I am happy to jump in and offer my help in



# THE DHAKA PROJECT

sourcing the garments for the children. I immediately start up the internet and search for suppliers in Bangladesh, after all a project that serves the community in Bangladesh in general and Dhaka specifically should also provide the commercial transaction within Bangladesh. No good sourcing uniforms from China to save a little donated money when there is a huge garment industry in Bangladesh that is craving for business. By bringing in money to this nation and having as much of the necessities for the Project made locally we benefit growth and prosperity in all possible aspects. So off we go to face this great new challenge. But before I can set off to do so, there is a very rewarding other thing to do on Sunday...

We conclude the day with a nice dinner which brought us back to the guesthouse well after midnight.

Upon getting to the guesthouse we see the truck ready waiting to be loaded with 3000 blankets donated by Emirates Airlines, which will be distributed to the extreme poor of Sripur and Manikhat, two rural villages, a long way outside of Dhaka. Maria intends to go there soon, to enrol families for her Project. Some of the guys of Maria's staff suggest they'd load the truck with the blankets immediately instead of at 4 AM the next morning. So off they go and I jump in bed for a short night.

Anoesjka Timmermans

## Noosh in Dhaka

### 2nd January 2008

Upon arrival in Hong Kong my anxiety started to get a hold of me. What was to be expected in Dhaka? A friend in Hong Kong fed me negative information about Dhaka, leaving me quite anxious by the time my flight left.

Arriving in Dhaka gave me a first fabulous impression. A truly friendly Bangla employee of the airline collected me from customs and helped me clear customs, get my luggage and delivered me to the very warm and loving person Maria, who came to get me from the airport well after midnight.

After a first night at the Skyline Hotel, it was time to meet the Dhaka Project, at last. A moment I had been looking forward to. My expectations were based on my volunteer experience in Nepal. There sources were minimum and the situation in which the children were housed and educated were of a bare minimum standard. Thus I expected to find something similar. At noon Maria took me to the Project. We walked over from the guest house through narrow, very well maintained and clean paths with garbage bins on



## THE DHAKA PROJECT

the side of the lane. Maria pointed these out to me and told me the Project had provided the bins and educated the community. Quite a task I bet, but it has a great result. The area looks nice and clean.

When we reached the school, to my great astonishment I was met by a group of nearly 200 children chanting a 'Welcome Anoesjka' with the biggest smiles on their faces. My heart melted instantly!

Before I knew it children were hugging me, grabbing my hand and giving me the warmest smiles I have seen in my life.

After this great welcome, I was taken through the school and again, I was astounded at what I found. A well maintained school building with nice little table/chairs in 6 classrooms downstairs, all in fresh paint. Upstairs my amazement grew as I was shown the learning department for parents of the children in the project, empowering especially the women by teaching them the skills needed to generate income in the garment industry.

So good to see that it is not only the children who are given a solid opportunity for the future, but also their families. On the other side of the building I was shown the training centre for the beautician industry.

Girls here learn the skills of manicure, pedicure and beauty treatments. Another sector that is good for employment on a local basis and provides opportunity for the future tourism industry.

Not only does the project educate, Maria also takes care of the children's health with an on site doctor, who works from a fully equipped clinic in the school/project building. A stack of vaccine passports for all the children showed the vaccination programme all the children are on, the personal record cards keep track of their health. Next door a fully equipped dentist makes sure that the children's teeth are kept in good condition.

Having seen the project's primary education centre, I was now introduced to the staff, which has just been expanded with a highly skilled and educated Bangla volunteer, who is now in charge of changing the school curriculum from Bangla to International standards, allowing the children enrolled an even better chance for the future.

What a fantastic first impression. As if that wasn't enough, I was overwhelmed by emotions once again upon meeting the pre-school children and the toddlers in the day-care centre. Again a storm of smiles, giggles, hugs and kisses was blown over me, leaving me dazzled with love and respect.



## THE DHAKA PROJECT

Looking at these kids, the way they are taken care of, the toys surrounding them, the sparkling eyes and clean faces and bodies, it was hard to imagine that I am actually in one of the world's poorest countries. The children I had worked with in Nepal were covered in sores when I first arrived and were allowed a bath only once a week, wearing their clothes for a full week. Here the kids look nice and clean, well taken care of and in great health.

All this would have been impossible without the work of the Project.

What an achievement! I am in awe, and will be much more so when I learn what it takes to get there....

### Friday 3 January

Today is a day off. One of Maria's staff, Sufiyan, is tasked to take me to see the 'old city' of Dhaka today. We drive off to the Sadargot harbour, which is like a bus station on the river. Hundreds of little and big passenger boats move to and from the mooring points or sit and wait for their passengers to arrive.

It is a hectic place where the poverty of the country is very visible. Dirt and garbage everywhere, people in dirty and very simple rags of clothes, life on the streets surrounding the harbour is as can be expected in a country as poor as Bangladesh.

After a day of sightseeing and getting a good impression of the city and its different neighbourhoods, which rank from the slums at the bottom end to a very classy embassy area in Gulshan, with wide lanes, beautiful colonial buildings and lots of nice green trees and gardens. Once you leave this small area of richest though, you are right back in the reality of Dhaka, with its super hectic traffic with its inevitable choking pollution, gazillion rickshaws and tuk-tuks, colourful women with beautiful smiles and men dressed in longis trading and producing all sorts of produce from little shop houses that line the streets.

Once back in the guest house, I am beat and ready for a nap. No one is home, so I get to stretch out, do some study work and reflect on the first 2 days in Dhaka. Nothing shocking so far, impressive yes, beautiful too, poor yes but with that typical Asian dignity, a massive suffering carried with pride.

During the day I have been hassling Sufiyan to tell me about his country, its education system, the marriage arrangements, family life and customs. It becomes apparent that education is very basic in the public schooling system, with a very high percentage of



## THE DHAKA PROJECT

fall-out due to the poverty. Marriages are still 90+% arranged by parents, making sure kids stay within their 'social class', however the kids do have choice between the marriage candidates presented to them. Family is a very key component of life. Whatever the parents decide, a child has to follow, regardless the age. Even adults must respect the parent's wishes regarding their activities, involvements and employment. So if a parent says no, the (adult) child must follow suit. Tough, especially if a local adult wishes to enrol in a charity project, working with the bottom end of society. Not a posh thing to do for local high classes. But a primary necessity for a charity organisation that focuses on educating the poorest. Imagine a situation where you have slaved yourself through life in order to allow your children to go school and university and then your child chooses to spend precious time working as a volunteer for the poorest people of your city. Noble, but at the same time not done for many of those parents who gave so much of their lives in order to enable their children access to high income employment, safeguarding the old age of the parents and a better life for the next generation(s). Now that is the culture in which Maria finds the great challenge of sourcing and contracting educated staff.

Anoesjka Timmermans