

MARIA makes a difference in DHAKA's **SLUMS**



An air hostess was so moved by the terrible conditions she witnessed on a trip to the capital of Bangladesh that it motivated her to step up and make a real difference, writes Akash Loungani.

Photos courtesy of MARIA CONCEICAO

Maria isn't afraid to get down and dirty and bring a smile to many faces.



A gentle zephyr has breathed new life into the slums of northern Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Maria Conceicao with her moonlit face, sunshine smile, and warm glow has descended like a guardian angel into the hearts and lives of the impoverished, deprived, and the most needy in the city's slums.

In April 2005, on her very first visit to Dhaka, Maria Conceicao, an Emirates Airlines airhostess, was shocked by the abject poverty that she witnessed. The sight of little children begging for alms with no clothes on their backs, the lack of sanitation and clean water, and the cramped spaces were just too overwhelming. She visited an orphanage run by nuns where she was introduced to a 16-year-old girl who had just delivered twins. The malnourished newborns could barely fit into the palm of her hand. She returned to Dubai knowing there was something that she had to do.



Students have benefited from the work of many volunteers who help the Dhaka Project.

More than Money

Maria knew she wanted to do more than just donate money. The following month, she returned to Dhaka on a ten-day field trip. On visiting orphanages, hospitals and going through the slums, she knew that real change was only possible by empowering the people with knowledge to meet life's challenges and the skills to reintegrate them into the community.

Maria set up a committee with five volunteers, and in July 2005 they rented a house, bought sewing machines, employed a sewing instructor and placed women from the streets into their sewing school. Since then, Maria with her indefatigable spirit, has poured in time, money, energy and resources to further the cause of the project. Initially, contributions were received in the form of clothes, towels and unused toiletries. Financing was aided through small charitable donations and garage sales.

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Imparting Skills

The primary objective of The Dhaka Project is to impart skills and knowledge to adult members of families so they can overcome poverty and become financially self-sufficient. At the same time, the emphasis is to support sustainable development, particularly with children. Short-term aid in the form of clothing, food, and medical aid is provided to the families while they are engaged in the learning process. They use local resources wherever possible so as to support the local economy and enable work longevity.

Three programmes that are being run in congruence to reach these objectives are:

Children's Education Development Programme:

The children are selected from low-productivity or low-income families living in slum areas. The programme caters to children aged four and above, providing them with education and supporting their daily basic needs such as food, school uniforms, books, stationery material, raincoats, shoes, socks and toiletries. A computer learning centre, a library and sport and recreational activities are available.

Women's Skills Development Programme:

The women's programme involves training in English language, tailoring, beautician skills and fabrication of handicrafts. The ladies are also provided with daily meals, stipend salary and raw materials. Courses last between six months to one year, and on completion of training, efforts are being made to place the women in jobs of their specialization. In order to help the women focus on learning their skills effectively and in a timely manner, a pre-school and a day care facility are offered for the participants' children.

CONTRIBUTION

Men's Skills Development Programme:

The men are admitted into a driving school, and undertake English classes. In addition, the project has recently purchased a small fleet of rickshaws, which the men may rent out to earn supplementary income. Welding and carpenter workshops are also available.

To ensure suitable employability, hygiene, medical, and welfare needs are critical. Basic homes are provided with clothes and food. In addition, a medical and dental centre is available. When needed, The Dhaka Project provides funds to poor families for essential medications.

Education, Doctors and Dentists

In operation for just over two years, The Dhaka Project continues to grow and empower the children and adults from the slums. A 65-member staff is responsible for over-seeing the successful running of all programmes and to the day-to-day affairs of the project.

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The Dhaka Project School provides education to 200 children, based on the Bangladeshi curriculum. The Dhaka Project also sponsors another 500 children to receive education in local area schools. The school is utilised in the evenings to teach basic reading and writing English courses to adults, along with knowledge of hygiene, family planning, and etiquette. Over 80 women have been trained in sewing and fabricating handicrafts.



The Dhaka Project sponsors many children to help them get an education.

All children under the care of the Dhaka Project have been vaccinated against hepatitis B, polio, and typhoid. As a contribution to the community, 50 rubbish bins and three water pumps have been placed to foster a cleaner environment. In addition, qualified dental practitioners visit the community on a regular basis, and a doctor runs weekly medical check-ups as well as being on call in case of any emergency situations.

Since inception, about 50 families have made the successful transition from their slum dwellings into more stable housing.



Health is a primary concern of the Dhaka Project.

The Story of Nurul and Hamida

Nurul and Hamida Islam, a married couple, had spent their entire life in the slums of Dhaka. They lived in close proximity to a stagnant lake, which was their only source of water.

They eked out an existence by begging on the streets and picking whatever grains and food they could find to eat from the grounds of the local markets. On hearing about the Dhaka Project, they knew they had to seize this opportunity to turn their world around. Hamida enrolled at the Dhaka Project's Beauty School, while Nurul learned how to drive. In just a few months, their lives were transformed beyond their expectations.

Aruna Sokhi, a beautician with a salon at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Dubai on a volunteer trip to Dhaka, was impressed with Hamida's potential and her constantly-improving grasp of the English language. She was thus able to offer Hamida a job in Dubai working in a salon. Soon after, Nurul was also offered a position as a driver for a tour company in Dubai.

The couple now awaits their passports and visas for this new dawn in their lives. Their success will inspire others to excel and make a difference in their lives. A larger salary working abroad will also ultimately make a huge difference in the lives of their families in Dhaka.

Volunteers Give Large

Volunteers continue to pour in from all corners of the world to share their passions and make a difference. From simply communicating with the children and families to help with their English, volunteers also help with writing skills, sports, music and photography, among other skills. Volunteers visiting Dhaka are given plenty of opportunity to help set up and construct facilities.

Volunteers have also been instrumental in helping raise funds for the project. Just recently, Rob Pickard and Robert Pearce climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and successfully raised AED53000. On January 18th, 2008, Maria and her army of volunteers will be taking part in the Dubai marathon and the 10km run, helping raise funds for the Project.



Maria has done an amazing job to help the poor of Bangladesh.

Air hostess Maria Conceicao in a less glamorous role.



Mother Maria


For a woman with no business background, Maria is an excellent example of social entrepreneurship. An exceptionally creative, innovative and passionate young Portuguese, Maria was honoured at the 2007 EU Women Inventors & Innovations Awards. 'Mother Maria', as her 700 devoted children affectionately call her, is not one to rest on her laurels. The journey is long and there is lot more that must be done.

The Dhaka Project continues to raise funds in order to be able to provide food, shelter, clothing, education and medical care to the children under their care. In order to become financially secure and sustainable, a clothes retail shop has been set up to sell donated clothes; a catering service has been set up to supply lunch meals to office workers; and handcrafts and dresses manufactured in-house are sold to generate fresh streams of revenue. An internet café has also been established.

A Concern for the Environment

With programmes like neighbourhood cleanup-day, installation of water wells, setting up public lavatories, tree planting, and use of renewable energy such as solar power, The Dhaka Project hopes to instil in children at a young age, a caring concern for the environment and a sense of social responsibility.

The Dhaka Project seeks to raise enough money to buy a plot of land and build a school in Dhaka for 1,000 children for primary, secondary and pre-university education, as well as vocational skills training. It also wishes to raise funds to open a Medical Centre for the slums.

The Dhaka Project has emerged on heroic wings, carrying with it hope and an abundance of love. Success depends on donations to improve the lives of children and help empower families to emerge from the slums. 

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