

The price of education in a land where illiteracy means death

Olav Murrlink

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“Snakes took shelter with men. Snakes did not kill men, men did not kill snakes. It seemed that the end of the world had started.” The words are a rare oral record of the worst environmental disaster in recorded history, which took place in 1970 when a relatively small cyclone combined with a high tide in the bowl-like topography of the Bay of Bengal, and whipped up a huge wall of water which swamped the low lying delta island of Bhola, Bangladesh. As many as half a million were drowned or crushed by the wave.

When the water subsided, a flow of international help flooded in, including an Australian man Fred Hyde who gathered together hundreds of homeless orphans and helped them eke out survival in a land stripped of trees and soaked in sea salt. Mr Hyde was planning to stay a few weeks, but ended up spending decades on the island, eventually moving from just keeping survivors alive, to building a network of 45 primary schools. The charity he founded, Co-operation in Development (COID) may be one of

the first and now largest Australian NGOs to have planted a flag in the new nation that emerged from the 1970 cyclone, but there is something unique about it: its tiny annual budget ...and the source of most of the dollars that make up its annual spend.

This is a children’s charity: by children, for children. The core of the fundraising effort to support children of the landless poor in the Ganges delta comes from the children of the well-heeled in Australia. The idea arose when Fred Hyde, who won the Queensland Senior Australian of the Year award last year, walked into St Leonard’s school in Melbourne in 1993 with a member of the local Rotary Club and challenged Tim Hawkes, then the headmaster there, to “build a school”. That challenge was taken up by students at the school. St Leonards now raises upwards of \$30,000 a year to support the operation of three schools, with children involved in running a huge annual gala dinner and auction on the school grounds as the centrepiece fundraising effort. Other schools have tackled the task differently, with Ivanhoe Girls’ Grammar students, for example, encouraged



to earn their donations by offering services such as babysitting, cake stalls and dog walking.

“Students take charge of fundraising, learning about committee management, about working in a team, about motivating their peers, success and failure, and so on, but also learning something I think is almost more important,” says former deputy head of St Leonard’s upper school, and now COID committee member Sue Walpole. “They learn to appreciate the accident of birth, and how we lucky people can give back.”

The scale of COID’s budget gives even the youngest fundraiser relative fundraising ‘superpowers’, with a single dollar sustaining a Bangladeshi child’s education for a fortnight – including teacher salaries, school books and stationery costs.

The ‘miracle’ has two sides. When that dollar lands in Bangladesh, COID bucks the usual pattern in international aid agencies by employing zero staff from the donor country and instead relying solely on Australian volunteers – notably the now 95-year-old Fred Hyde – and Bangladeshi staff paid at Bangladesh wages. Even its running expenses (such as the printing of the organisation’s twice-yearly ‘magazine’) is donated, so that almost every cent donated (bar a few dollars going to bank fees and audit costs) heads over to Bangladesh where the Aussie dollar is again leveraged in buying pens and chalk at Bangladeshi prices. Its tiny budget – about equal to the salaries of four Australian teachers – not only gives full time free education to 13,600 children, but employs 178 staff.

Each school is almost literally an island of education in regions that would otherwise have no school. The schools are built on donated land, with some of the labour to build the schools also coming from the impoverished local



community. The soil is built up, so the schools keep their floors above the flood level when the annual monsoon rains come. “The government is always slow to build schools in areas that aren’t well serviced with roads, so that is where we have focused on,” says Mr Hyde. “Building where no-one else will come.” This is very marginal land, where the parents of the children build shacks that cling to the sides of dykes or *bunds* for safety, and where the rivers tear away at the edges of the island.

For Bhola, COID is also a beacon of hope, and literally saves lives, with children and adults not uncommonly poisoned by mistaking poison for medicine due to illiteracy. Fred Hyde’s pioneering effort has seen his surname immortalised as a nickname for white people (or



“Hydes”). Bhola, meanwhile, is slowly turning its fortunes around. The land remains as flat and low in the water as ever, but the dykes are higher, the cyclone shelters that have sprouted out of the earth offer an escape that didn’t exist in 1970, and the island’s mud is now criss-crossed with (poorly) paved roads that mark out the increased prosperity that often started with a seed planted in the mud by an long-retired Australian and watered by small donations by children from the Lucky Country. **ET**

If you think your school could benefit from being involved with COID, contact COID managing committee chair Dr Olav Muurlink, whose day job is senior lecturer in organisational behaviour at Central Queensland University in Brisbane on 0427 619 800 or o.muurlink@cqu.edu.au or contact committee member Sue Walpole on **1300 731 916** or sue.a.walpole@gmail.com You can also check out their website www.fredhyde.org