



- Letters
- Voicebox
- Chintito
- Newsnotes
- Cover Story
- Straight Talk
- Perspective
- Musings
- Crime
- Interview
- International
- Food for Thought
- View from the Bottom
- Endeavour
- A Roman Column
- Music
- Sci-Tech
- Dhaka Diary
- Book Review
- Comics

SWM Home

Endeavour

Community Spirit

Andrew Morris

You could easily spend years in this city and not even know of its existence. Hidden away in the triangle formed by upmarket Banani and Gulshan, and bustling Mohakhali, a stone's throw but also a universe away from the villas and the trendy boutiques, the slum area of Korail is an island of poverty in a sea of affluence. But you won't find despair or self-pity here. This makeshift community of over a hundred thousand residents (that number alone bigger than the population of dozens of fully-fledged towns back home) is characterised above all by resilience and determination.

Korail is just one of many slum areas in Dhaka, each different in its own way. Similarly, the Spanish NGO most active here since 1999 is not the only body involved in this kind of work. But this is where I've pitched up, and Intervida are my hosts for the day, and it seems that many of the insights and lessons here are indeed replicated in other disadvantaged areas of the city, so it's worth pursuing and looking more closely at this one example.

As you enter, the roads narrow and the buildings huddle in. The shops and houses, mostly made of corrugated iron, stand defiant but also precarious, under a sky as flat and white as paper. This community, I am told, is lucky -- they have access to some basic sanitation and amenities that other slums can only aspire to, but you are always aware in a place like this that its very existence is under constant threat, subject to the capricious whims of administrations keen on quick fixes. Nevertheless, today life goes on as usual: the area has the feel and sound of a busy marketplace. There are stores selling brightly coloured mattresses, DVDs and groceries. A tailor is putting the finishing touches to a pair of trousers, while next-door freshly pressed shirts hang from a thin rack. Tinny rock music blares from speakers wired up to the walls. Old women peer warily as they walk past, and in the gutters the pie-dogs lap at the fetid greenish water. Piles of rubbish line the roadside. There are several babies and toddlers playing naked in the lanes. Somewhere amongst all these shacks are the homes of all these people milling around. The dominant colours here are metal-grey and mud-brown, never more so than in times of flooding, when these tiny walkways are quickly waterlogged. But there are also occasional flashes of bright blue and yellow: these are the colours of the uniforms worn by the children to whom Intervida is offering a helping hand.

Intervida's "integrated" approach, as used in countries from Cambodia to Mali and from the Philippines to Bolivia, is to offer a network of cradle-to-grave services, from day-care centres for the very young, to orphanages, cultural development centres, adult education classes, primary health care facilities and women's development centres, which bind the community together and try to involve all its residents. And at the centre of these webs in 17 different slums are the "Pathshalas" (schools), which cater both to children from impoverished families and to working kids.

In Korail, the community pooled their resources to purchase the land for the Pathshala. To step into the little schoolyard is to enter a vibrant world abuzz with energy and colour. Small classes of uniformed children at work on their various activities, in bamboo classrooms decorated from floor to ceiling with the pictures and poems created by the children themselves. The teachers, whose salaries match those of their government school counterparts, are still to some extent locked into a methodology which emphasises rote memorisation at the expense of active learning, but at the very least they have fashioned a positive and encouraging environment, unlike some of the dreary cobweb-laced classrooms I have seen in regular primary schools.

These children have been selected from among families whose collective income is below Tk 5000 a month. Their schooling is completely free, including their books, uniforms, and even their tiffin. This system, which continues even when they enter mainstream education, raises familiar questions about dependency and sustainability, but it's not hard to imagine what might happen to the enthusiasm of parents for such education if they were asked to invest some of their hard-won earnings. Far easier to send their offspring out to work. Parental commitment remains an issue despite such free provision: the need for money in the present is far more tangible than the likely but still uncertain benefits of education for the future. These nagging issues though are not the only challenges faced by the organisation. There is a transience to these communities too, as labourers migrate in and out, which makes maintaining continuity a constant headache.

Nevertheless, wherever possible a dialogue between the organisation and the community is sustained. In an office in the school compound, a meeting is going on between some of the fathers of these children and a group of dynamic social development workers sent from Intervida's head office, who encourage discussion on a range of issues from education to hygiene and from crime to family planning. The talk is open and free-flowing, and seems a testament to a sense of involvement among the local parents.

The social workers are convinced that the nature of mobility in Bangladesh will allow these children at least a chance to haul themselves up out of the spiral of poverty, given an education. You can only hope this is true. What is beyond doubt however is that to deny an education to these kids would absolutely guarantee a lifetime of destitution.

Some of the kids are already hedging their bets. Down the road from the main school is the "Second Chance" school, which caters exclusively to working children, whose youthful zest is combined with the brash self-confidence gained through a life on the streets. Here too, the teachers appear dedicated and the kids energised, encouraged by a positive environment. These children work in doctor's surgeries, as home helps, and gathering rubbish and plastic on the streets. It's interesting how the latter group is dismissively referred to by some of the kids themselves as "tokai" (scavengers). Already it seems, a sense of hierarchy has entered these young minds: a league table of disadvantage in which some clearly languish at the bottom.

A few steps away is the Cultural Development Centre, which looks after the extra-curricular needs of those children who are not at the school, which operates on a shift system. Here the desk-bound learning is forgotten, and the children engage in dramas, dances and songs, providing an outlet for play, imagination and creativity which has little place in their home lives, their parents too preoccupied with making ends meet. They are led by a self-confident young woman, herself wearing the standard blue and yellow, whose dedication is impressive.

The morning finishes with a visit to the neat Primary Health Care centre, which deals with vaccinations against contagious diseases, hygiene and basic health education, and to the Day Care Centre, a sort of crèche where the youngest pre-primary children are catered for, and taught games and activities which encourage the development of motor skills and foster curiosity and co-operation.

After a day like this among those who eke out a life in Korail, you are struck both by the contrast with the people in the smart neighbourhoods all around, and by how much we actually share. That evening, an image returned to my mind and refused to subside. Sitting in the day care centre, I'd looked through a gap in the wall, only to realise with a start that I was looking into someone's home. An almirah, with carefully folded shirts in a pile, a TV perched high above a few schoolbooks. And there, no more than a few feet away from me, a handsome teenager, looking intently into a heart-shaped mirror, brushing his hair, peering at his teeth, and, finally satisfied, making his way out into the morning. Despite the obvious difference in living standards between him and just about anyone reading this, what he and his neighbours also want from their lives is more of the things they find pleasant, and fewer of the hardships. He's looking for contentment, and just a small piece of dignity. In this, of course, he's no different from you and me.



At play in a cultural development centre. Photo: Andrew Morris



Studying at an Intervida pathshala.