

working children and the rise of tourism in Cox's Bazar

Community Schools for Working Children

Most schools we support here in Bangladesh are found in the centre of crowded, labyrinthine slums in Cox's Bazar. The narrow alleys are jammed with tin roofed huts, lines of drying fish, and swarms of mosquitos hover over the puddles left from the last downpour.

The people here live on borrowed land, having lost their own homes through the frequent cyclones and floods that occur in this part of the country. Even if the day is suffocatingly hot, each classroom is full of excited children with huge smiles, chorusing the greeting 'How are youuu??!'.

The nine schools are modest buildings, bursting with life and colour. Drawings and paintings are strewn from wall to wall, with creations of all sorts hanging from the ceilings. These children are from some of the poorest families in the world, and have to spend much of their time earning an income for their parents, or even looking after an entire household. Their time here though, is sacrosanct. It's a time where they can just be children, they can create, learn, play and express themselves, free from the burden of adult responsibilities.

The Rise of tourism in Cox's Bazar

In the months since the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, which killed over 1,100 garment factory workers and injured some 2,500 more, there has been an increased focus on the ills of child labour and working conditions in the country's ready-made garment (RMG) sector. What is less focussed on is the impact of rising tourism in areas like Cox's Bazar.

Although prohibited by the Labour Act (2006), there are nearly 3.2 million working children aged between 5-17 throughout the country, many in hazardous conditions.

On one of our monitoring trips, we visited a classroom where a twinkly eyed boy got up and began to sing. He beamed from ear to ear and his voice was mesmerising. He's exceptionally talented, and he enjoyed every minute of the song. His name is Kaamil, he is 10 years old and the teacher told us that later he would have to sing on the beach to make money.

When we talked to him about this he said *"I like to sing, but not to have to go to the beach and sing for money. I wish I did not have to work at all. If I could change anything about my life it would be this."*

When Children on the Edge began supporting education for working children here in Cox's Bazar over 4 years ago, tourism was already on the rise. Speaking to The Independent at the time, John Littleton, our Asia regional manger predicted that *"As the area's tourist industry continues to boom, it will likely continue to attract families seeking employment in menial labour and service positions. As these jobs generally provide only subsistence wages, we anticipate that many more children will be expected to work to help support their families."*



Kaamil sings on the beach to earn money



Maisa is a tour guide but wants to be a doctor

At this time children were beginning to gravitate towards the beach to take photos for tourists, or sell water, but the majority were still catching shrimps, collecting scrap for recycling or drying fish.

Over the years each visit has shown another hotel or line of restaurants pop up, and the consequence is a change of role for the working children. This has plateaued in the last year or so, yet staff from our partner organisation MUKTI have observed a consistent increase in the number of children working on the beach and the hotel/motel area.

Maisa is 12 years old. A few years ago she was making garlands with her mother, but now her father has died and her mother is sick with a heart problem. Maisa has to earn more money. Consequently she is working on the beach as a tour guide, then in the evening she is responsible for her four sisters.

The organisation 'Equations' describes how *"Tourism development is highly unregulated and not monitored for its negative impacts. The mitigation of these negative impacts therefore is also not on the agenda. A little known and even less acknowledged impact is that on children"*.

Our partner Bimal Chandra Dey Sarker in Bangladesh describes how "in some ways the jobs on the beach are safer as children are interacting in an open area and there are tourist police, but they need to be in school"

Maisa has a role greeting and guiding strangers which makes her increasingly vulnerable, she has no able bodied parents to look out for her, so the school is her lifeline. Teachers from the schools now go regularly to the beach to recruit children into education.

Maisa says *"If I have a problem I can talk to the teacher, I have learned to read and write so it is already changing my life. If I could change anything I would become a doctor. If I could do this it would change everything for me and my family"*.

Kaamil also has very little support outside school. He lives in a slum called Kutadiapora. His mother has died and his father left them for another woman and does not send any money to help him and his sister.

"I get to school at 9.00am which I love! My favourite things to do are singing, drawing pictures and playing. I don't like to go sing on the beach, but the school has even helped with this. When I earn money on the beach now I can count it".

As the tourism industry has grown in Cox's Bazar, Children on the Edge has responded to the added vulnerability of children by increasing the amount of schools from two to nine, bringing education to a total of 900 working children.

The teachers are trained not just in child friendly education methods, but are fully available to the children as a trusted adult to turn to, they negotiate with parents and provide training in the community on child care and the importance of health and education.

The project is also developing child councils, where children can speak up about their views on the schools and look out for each other. As trust is built, children feel more confident sharing the pressures they face in their lives and the places they have to work.

The various services and care provided by the schools are vital for building a safety net around the children to prevent them going down this road to abuse and exploitation.

You can find out more about project at www.childrenontheedge.org

Our response