



ALL TOGETHER IN DIGNITY

ASIAN FORUM

ATD Fourth World Regional Team
region.asia@atd-fourthworld.org

June 2010

From ATD Fourth World Regional Team (Patricia and Claude Heyberger, Rosemarie Hoffman-Tran and Quyen Tran)

Last March, the ATD Fourth World's representative to Unesco and a member of our regional team took part in the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education for All (EFA) held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The meeting examined the progress towards achieving the Education For All goals for the most marginalized people against the background of the various crises of recent years.

One cannot help feeling concerned about the impact of these crises, especially for vulnerable population groups. Participants in the consultation highlighted the creative efforts of civil society and social movements to promote education in this context. In requesting new and more efficient mechanisms for collecting and processing information on EFA in the countries, they noted the importance of bringing to light, not only the needs of marginalized and excluded groups, but, more importantly, their proposals. Our assessment of progress made often fails to integrate actions taken by local organizations and people of all walks of life; by parents who value the strengthening of the community rather than individuals and by children who are capable and willing to take responsibility for the advancement of others at an early age. The narratives below remind us of such contributions, which help ensure that **education is really for all.**

« *Reaching The Unreached* »

Shohag wants to become a social worker

From Mati Bangladesh¹, December 2009

"Shohag is 13 years old and lives with his family in Mymensingh. He does all the things that other children of his age do: play, laugh, make jokes. However his life is different from his friends'. When he was 5 years old, Shohag fell gravely ill with typhoid fever which caused him to lose his eyesight. He can only distinguish between light and dark. That is why he doesn't go to school.

We met Shohag in the park, begging, and start talking with him. We learn that his father is badly indebted and has no way out of his situation. He works as Rickshaw driver and is about 65 years old. Often he has a fever or cough or is just too weak to drive a Rickshaw. That's why the family is deeply in trouble.



In order to find out more about his family's situation we visited Shohag at home and spoke with his parents. They told us that they are deeply in debt. The problem had started gradually. They borrowed a few Taka here and there to buy a little food, or to pay the rent for their hut. Every month they paid the money lender back as much as they could. But then one day the sum owed had already climbed to 2.500 Taka (US\$36), and the money lender wanted interest: for each day that Shohag's father couldn't pay back the complete sum, he demanded 100 Taka (US\$1,5) per day. As a rickshaw driver the father could earn about 150 Taka on good days. After the 100 Taka interest there wasn't much left to live on, let alone repay the principal. A kilo rice costs

35 Taka, a kilo spinach 20 Taka. A kilo of rice cannot feed a family of five for long. This was the beginning of a terrible time for the family. That was the moment when Shohag decided to go begging to bring, at least, some food home. Money lending business is widespread in Bangladesh. Once trapped in this vicious cycle, the poorest have no means to rid themselves of this dependency. Often they make new debts with other people or organizations to pay old ones and sink deeper and deeper into the dependency of loan sharks.

We talked with Shohag's family about how Mati could help them. The mother decided to become a Mati member and received an interest free loan with which to pay back the money lender. With some pressure the money lender forgave part of the debt, because he had already earned

quite a lot from the horrendous interest rate he had imposed. The money the family now pays back to Mati is fixed with regard to the family's financial situation. The parents are grateful that their son doesn't have to go begging anymore.

For the future, Shohag's father wishes his son to learn a trade or to go to school, just as his younger sisters should. Mati contacted a school for the blind in Mymensingh which is ready to shoulder the schooling expenses for all the siblings. Shohag will soon have his entrance exam. Shohag has his own ideas about the future: he wants to become a social worker! He particularly wants to support his own family and to be able to learn to read and write like all of his friends! This wish may soon become true thanks to his enrollment in the school for the blind."

¹Visit: www.matibangladesh.org Self-defined rural development

Every parent's voice heard and honored at school

Shwu Shiow, Chinese and a mother of 4 children is a permanent volunteer of ATD Fourth World. Below is an account of her experience as a member of the parents association of a school in Hualien, a town 250 km from Taipei, where she is living.

"I started volunteering in the pre-school where my son Daniel spent three years. The pre-school had been founded recently by a government program meant for low-income communities in which most of the residents were either aboriginal or had trouble paying for school fees.

First, I was asked to be a storyteller, and did that every morning for a year. The second year, I spent less time there, only going on Wednesdays. However, I was also taking books to a little girl who lived near the school but didn't go because her family couldn't afford it. For a year, I came to read stories to her, with her mother and little cousin present. In the end, she was able to go to the pre-school, thanks in part to donations that a friend had collected from a group of children, and in part to scholarships that had been provided after some teachers had asked for them. In this way, the school showed solidarity with the family.

Oct 17, 2009: Children in Taipei have drawn a "Friendship Vehicle" to meet children of everywhere. Read more about this Taponi campaign at : <http://www.taponi.org/site/Photos-of-Dazibaos.html>



I got to know the teachers and parents at the school little by little. Our children's friends often came to our house to play or do their homework. We met some very poor families in the neighborhood whose children were in our children's classes. Our daughter Marie and me shared these stories with some friends who also had young children. Our friend Joseph and his wife Yuling who are living in Taipei encouraged their own children to write to the two most isolated children in Marie's class. Marie passed on the letters herself, because the girls in her class didn't know how to address an envelope. This pen-pal correspondence lasted for three years, creating a friendship between the children of our rural neighborhood and children in the capital.

Our son Daniel told me of a classmate who couldn't take a sports class because she didn't have the proper shoes, only rubber sandals. Our son Wilfried told me that one of his friends didn't have a swimming suit, and so she could only watch the swimming class, not participate.

Often the poorer children couldn't participate in school activities because they cost money, and they also couldn't go on any school trips. Before each trip, I would write to the teachers of my children, asking what the parents could do so that all the children would be able to participate. I also took advantage of school meetings at the start and end of each semester to thank the teachers

and the director for whatever they were able to do to stand in solidarity with the underprivileged children. I spoke out as a parent: for me, in this school, the most important thing was not competition but rather community.

At Wilfried's graduation party, the director asked me to speak, even though I was only the vice president of the parents association. The president was there, so I refused to take his place as speaker. The director said to me: "The president is just a worker, he doesn't know how to talk!" It was at that moment that I decided to make sure that all the neighborhood parents' voices would be heard and honored.

Before our son Raymond's graduation in 2009, I decided to interview all of the parents of Raymond's classmates, with Yen-Chen, a friend studying to be a documentarian. We asked them to talk about their wishes for their child's future. We worked with the school so that excerpts from these filmed interviews would be given to the children, as a gift on the part of their parents. All the parents agreed to the program, which was very moving. One little girl, whose mother was speaking on screen just at the moment when she received her diploma, burst out in tears, touched by her mother's words.

In this way, we created connections to improve the relationship between the local parents and the school. Last year, the school hired a new director. With a delegation of teachers, we asked the school to seek a director who would pay attention to the least privileged students, and who would make sure that school activities excluded no one.

Last November, with parents and school personnel (including the new director), we put on a photo exhibit that shared the lives, the courage, and the smiles of very poor children on four continents. We were able to speak about poverty with parents, teachers, and some neighbors. The exhibit has now gone on to another association involving other teachers—this is where we are today."

Teaching at an early age

"At 16 years old, Babar Ali (from India, West Bengal) must be the youngest head master in the world.

The minute his lessons are over at his school, Babar Ali doesn't stop to play, he heads off to share what he has learnt with other children from his village... He was just nine when he began teaching a few friends as a game. They were all eager to know what he learnt to school every morning..."

Read more of this article by Damian Grammaticas, on the BBC website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8299780.stm

Do you know other children keen on sharing the knowledge they learn at school? What do they do?