

Community Spirit

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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,



At play in a cultural development centre.

PHOTO: ANDREW MORRIS

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 posi-