

## HOPE FOR RIVER DWELLERS

The Jamuna River rises in the foothills of the Himalayas, and makes its serpentine way across one of the world's great flood plains - Bangladesh. The Jamuna is a vast waterway. Six years ago it was bridged for the first time, providing a transport corridor linking the eastern and western parts of the country.

At the height of the annual monsoon, the Jamuna is a raging torrent, often overflowing its banks and flooding the surrounding countryside. When the waters recede in the dry season, sandbanks appear, beckoning otherwise landless people to farm this no-man's-land, and produce a meagre food supply for their families. Thousands of Bengali children are born and raised on these sandy patches. But the ephemeral life of their island – here today and sometimes gone with the next flood – destines these youngsters to a life on the margins: educationally deprived, malnourished, prone to recurring illness and entering adulthood without marketable skills. This becomes their legacy to the next generation.

The Jamuna Rural Development Service (JRDS) is Action Aid's latest project – generously funded by a former Board member and his wife. In July, JRDS field workers will make their way, by boat, to these river islands, which border Jamalpur and Tangail Districts on the eastern bank of the Jamuna, and Shiraganj District on the west. Within months, dozens of illiterate adults will become part of a functional education program, which will also double as a network of savings group. During the life of the program, 400 people will learn to read and write their own Bengali language, and most of them will pool their hard-earned takas (the Bangladesh monetary unit), creating a micro credit scheme which will sustain small ventures in income generation: livestock raising, small businesses – such as a tea shop – rice husking, poultry farming and kitchen gardens.

The educational emphasis in the river project will enrich the whole family. While mum and dad are learning to read and write, their children will be enrolled in five pre-schools, which will meet in local houses. The children will be taught basic skills, such as alphabet identification, numeracy and simple reading. Teaching aids will be put to good use – counting rods and counting frames, charts of rhymes and pictures. These rudimentary beginnings, will give 120 of these “preschoolers” entry to primary education in a government school. This will break the cycle of educational poverty, which has been passed, endlessly, from one generation of river dwellers to another.

The health component in the river project will address issues of nutrition, clean water, sanitation, health education, HIV/AIDS awareness and training for traditional birth attendants (or midwives). And around the villages, which spring

up on these islands, trees – with income earning capacity – will be planted in their hundreds.

The timeless Jamuna will, inexorably, fret away the sandy islands and create others in their place. But not before hundreds of children and their parents have been given fresh hope for the future - better health, education and other life skills.

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