



OVERSEAS

# Dying to get to school in the Bangladesh delta

Assoc Prof Olav Muurlink, School of Business and Law, Head of Course – Sustainable Innovation, CQUniversity Australia

**T**here are 808 rivers in Bangladesh, a country little more than twice the size of Tasmania, emptying nutrient rich water from India, Nepal and even China into the Bay of Bengal. The result is a delta that is impossibly green and fertile, providing enough to feed 160 million and leave spare for export. But the waters carry with them a terrible threat to the children of Bangladesh, rarely more so than on Bhola, the largest island in the delta, an island with a strong Australian connection. Here, a charity founded by a man who was the world's oldest international charity worker – the remarkable nonagenarian Fred Hyde AM – has built 48 schools and 15 kindergartens using funds raised largely from Australian school children.

Fred came to Bhola Island in 1980, with the district still reeling from history's single worst environmental catastrophe when on a night in November 1970 the island was virtually swept clean by a

cyclone that took up to 500,000 lives in a single night, with women and children's lives taken disproportionately by the 15 metre storm surge. The single biggest killer of children 50 years later is still drowning. The death rate in Bangladesh for children 1–4 years old is a horrifying 86.3 per 100,000 per year – which is close to the preventable death rate for Australians of all ages put together.

The charity Fred founded, Co-operation in Development, this year resolved to go beyond building schools to literally building bridges. Every January, I travel by motorbike, boat and bus to every one of our remote schools, and just sit down and chat with each of the 170 odd teachers, and find out the issues that they are experiencing on the ground. In my day job as an academic I once taught HR, but the HR work in Bangladesh is sweaty and wet in ways that are hard to imagine in Australia (I'm the one in the photo with my hands on my hips, talking with teachers through my interpreter).





I now work as an associate professor in the field of 'social innovation' at Central Queensland University. Social innovation is the art of tackling 'wicked' problems, that is, problems that so deeply entrenched in the way we do things that they are hard to budge.

Take child drowning. We build schools because there wouldn't be a school in the areas where we build them if we didn't. Like Australia, these super-remote locations are not prime teaching positions, so government teachers don't want to be posted there. But unlike Australia, there are still heaps of kids. So when we build a school, it's a magnet for the children – and so keen are they to get to class that they take risks.

These are children who have grown up in water and around water – often from homes that have been displaced by erosion, high tide, and floods. They trudge happily enough through mud and thigh deep high tides during the wet season – and with that attitude, not surprisingly, 'our' children outperform graduates of other schools in the region at the government-run secondary school entrance exams. But trouble comes when there is one of literally tens of thousands of creeks in between them and class. This year alone, we had three drownings in our school community, including one toddler who came with her mum – a teacher – to school, and while she was at the chalkboard wandered silently into a pond.

So, this year we resolved to tackle some of the main danger



points, including replacing the rickety bamboo bridge, or 'shaa-ko' behind our school at Char Horish. This was the scene of one drowning – as a boy took to a boat to cross the fast flowing 20 metre 'stream' alone, and another where a teacher and her baby slipped and fell into the water on her way to school. The new bridge has low handrails to allow kids heading to school on their own (while the parents head to farms or fishing to make a meagre living) to safely cross. The total cost of the bridge (pictured) was a little under \$1000, installed – around 10% of the cost of a new school. That's a lot of money locally – for less than 10 times that amount we could build a whole school for 350 kids – but at least it takes the edge off one wicked problem. And by the way, the bridge gave rise to another wicked problem: we had to build it so that it was VERY motor-bike unfriendly, otherwise it won't last the rigours of local traffic.

If you are interested in more information about our schools, feel free to contact me on [o.muurlink@cqu.edu.au](mailto:o.muurlink@cqu.edu.au)

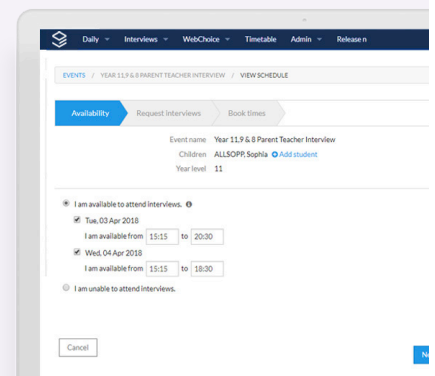


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