Supporters’ Visit to Bangladesh

2\textsuperscript{nd} - 12\textsuperscript{th} September 2014
At least 150 million people live in Bangladesh. Practical Action has been working there since the early 1980’s, and has had an office in Dhaka since 1990. We employ 130 people in Bangladesh. Our priority areas for Bangladesh, and the reason for making them a priority, are:

- **Improving agriculture** to provide food security and income; 75% of Bangladesh’s population live in rural areas, and depend on agriculture for their income.

- **Better drinking water, sanitation, and waste services;** People living in Bangladesh’s fast-growing urban slums usually have poor latrines, drainage, and drinking water, so catch diseases like cholera.

- **Reducing risk from disasters** for marginalised groups and communities; Large areas of Bangladesh have always flooded during monsoon season, but the waters’ strength and duration are getting much worse, and dry land is becoming a premium.

- **Helping people access modern energy** for all by 2030; only 40% of homes in Bangladesh have mains electricity, and most people cook on dried cow dung and wood, which creates choking smoke.

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**Overall Impression of Bangladesh: from Saskia James’ diary**

*What’s your most memorable moment?*

Our visit to Shantir village, and then, nearby, to see the weavers will remain with me forever. Rarely do you get to see such a remote part of such an unknown country, to meet the people, enjoy their company, and to visit for a purpose beyond tourism.

*What do you think of the people you met?*

I have been thoroughly impressed with the Bangladeshi people in general; such resilience, such stamina, and such talent. They’re intrigued but not intrusive, inquisitive but not insensitive, grateful but not reliant. Their huge smiles and taste for fun are almost magical.

*What made you stop and think?*

- **Water; there is water everywhere and yet Bangladeshi people have learnt to live with it, love it, and even thrive with it - will this always be the case?**

- **Bangladesh’s position in the world economy. It seems to have so many talented, hard-working people, and so many resources, and yet it barely registers in the world economy or the tourist trade.**
We began our journey in Practical Action’s office in Dhaka. We met all the staff, and were given a briefing on our programmes, projects, and the country itself, before the two project visits on this, our first day in Bangladesh.

1. Helping Women Smallholder Farmers through Pabna Meat

Mohammed Liaquat Ali is the proprietor of Pabna Meat, a company which supplies hygienic, organic beef and goat meat to hotels and restaurants in Dhaka, and to the public via shopping malls, to meet the growing middle-class demand for local, quality meat. As an ethical company they source 10% of their meat from impoverished smallholder farmers, principally women. The women buy a cow with a loan from ‘Bashar’, a local NGO, and then fatten it up with technical advice from Practical Action. For example, we help them to source and use food concentrate, rather than relying solely on fodder or grazing, both of which require transport and land access. After 3 months, they sell the cow to Pabna Meat for a profit. It’s a win: win arrangement, and the company wants to expand, and to increase the ratio of meat it buys from these women. They are exploring commercial loans, and Practical Action is helping them, via our ‘ACRE’ initiative (http://practicalaction.org/impact-investment).

2. Agricultural Helpline at Krishi Call Centre

At Practical Action’s Krishi Call Centre, we met three impressively educated young agricultural experts handle technical enquiries as they came in, thick and fast. They were: Dr Rasha Farizana (DVM): Livestock, Nihanika Dan Gupta (left): Agriculture, Foyez Ibn Shams; Fisheries.

Our favourite piece of advice was to the caller whose fish were suffocating through lack of oxygen in the water – Foyez recommended sending the children in to the pond, for a good splashy swim, which he assured us definitely works! Nihanika explained that as mobile phones are so common in Bangladesh, often she is talking to them as they work with their crops and livestock, in the fields.

On the way back to the guest house, Kate and Val each brought a ‘shalmar kameez’ which is the local, cool (both style- and temperature-wise) way to dress.

We ended the day in the ‘Star Kebab House’, near our guesthouse. Food was not a problem on this trip – the UK’s ‘Indian’ restaurants actually serve Bengali cuisine so with regular favourites like bhunas, jalfreysis, biryanis, rice and chapattis, we never went hungry.

Krishi Call Centre: extract from Valerie Iles’ Diary

The Call Centre that PA is funding […] is toll free, with most calls coming through mobile phones from farmers all over Bangladesh. They call, and talk to one of a team of experts in fisheries, crops or livestock. Those we met were keen and very well equipped for their role with excellent educational qualifications. Notably most of their educational programmes had included considerable fieldwork so they clearly felt confident dealing with even experienced farmers […] one talked of how happy and proud she is to be able to help between 50 and 60 callers a day.
Friday 5th September 2014: Jamuna

Jamuna Boat Trip: extract from Dawn McGahey's travel notes

A three hour drive to Jamuna Resort with a cruise in the afternoon. On the journey it was fascinating watching people in the towns. Lots of tuk-tuks and rickshaws, and surprising how many people were on a bicycle - up to 4. Buses packed to the brim, with children riding on the roofs. Street vendors walking up to cars and tapping on windows to sell their products.

90% of Bangladeshis are Muslim (9% are Hindu, and there are also a small number of Buddhists and Christians), so Friday is a day of rest across the country. As we couldn’t visit any projects, we took a boat trip on the Jamuna, which is one of Bangladesh’s largest rivers.

Accompanying us on the boat, and for the rest of our travels through the country, were three Bangladeshi colleagues who deserve a special mention here.

- Merhab Ul Goni, who patiently answered every question about the charity’s work, and knew all about Bangladesh’s culture, history, flora, and fauna.
- Azhar Hossain Mridha and Sushanta Kumar Paul, our drivers and language instructors.

We are grateful to all the staff of Practical Action Bangladesh who helped us, especially:

- Veena Khaleque, Practical Action Bangladesh’s Director, for facilitating our visit, and all her senior managers for their first-day hospitality, and for sharing dinner with us on our last night.
- David Probin Rozario, for organising the trip’s logistics.
- Anwar Hossain and his team in Faridpur, for making us feel so welcome, and Nayeemur Rahman, for ensuring that our time in Jessore went smoothly, including the airport run.

The group at Jessore Airport (back row, l-r: Valerie, Andrew, Azhar, Saskia James, Sushanta. Front row, l-r: Kate, Dawn, Mehrab)
Saturday 6th September 2014: Sirijganj

We drove to Sirijganj, in the north-east of Bangladesh, where Practical Action is helping impoverished people in flood-prone areas to take control of their lives.

1. Shantir: Building A New Village

On land donated by a local philanthropist, Practical Action has built a new village: Shantir Neer Guchaagram. The ground’s level was raised 3 metres by earthworks, then stabilised with planting. In the monsoon season, it is entirely surrounded by water, but the ground is well above the flood level. The village’s 95 residents used to live in precarious, insecure shacks perched on river banks. They helped build the houses, latrines, grain store, and goat pens, as well as the market gardens.

Case Study Johura Begum is a widow with four children; three who have married and moved out, and Halima, who is still at school. They used to part-rent a small shared house, and had no security, no privacy, no space to grow food, and no money. Johura said that before they came here, Halima cried all the time because their family was looked down on by everyone. Then they were invited to move to Shantir. Johura helped build her home with her own hands, which she said gave her a real sense of ownership. She now has privacy, a toilet, and even a garden where she grows crops to sell at the local market, which helps pays for Halima's school expenses. Halima is much more confident, and now wants to be a teacher. Johura said:

‘I feel free because I have my own house and I don’t depend on others – now I am an independent woman!’

2. Training Women Weavers

The boat then took us back to the ‘mainland’ village, Konabari Belkachi, where for 200 years almost all the male residents have been employed in weaving workshops, making saris. Women also want (and financially need) to work, so Practical Action provided 40 home looms and training to use them. The home looms make smaller pieces of material than the big machines in the workshops, so the women are not in direct competition to the men. Also, the work can be done around childcare and domestic chores. The women weavers meet weekly to manage the scheme, discuss personal problems, and community issues such as helping plan anti-flood measures. They now want to increase production, and want more training to achieve this. They all said of the scheme, ‘Practical Action showed us the way forward!’

Case Study Shahinur Begum moved to the village to join her husband, and they have 3 sons, one of whom is still living at home. They lived together in a shared house, renting space (not even a room). Then she asked Practical Action to train her as a weaver. Now, she is buying a house for her family via a micro-credit scheme, which she can repay with her earnings as a weaver. She said:

‘When I was a lodger, I was hungry most of the time – now I have enough food and can send my son to school. My own house is a peaceful place – no-one can make demands of me. I feel in control. I am happier, and my husband is too, and he likes it that we are both earning.’
3. Good Business from Sanitary Napkins

Sanimart was started in 2012 to provide training to high school drop-outs, and then continued and expanded by Practical Action when the original funding ended. Sanimart’s employees are girls, aged 13-19, who have left education principally because their families couldn’t afford it. There are 7 Sanimart centres in Bangladesh, employing a total of 55 girls to make low cost, hygienic sanitary towels which are sold to the public, and also to schools, hospitals, and colleges.

At the small centre we visited, we met Mrs Selima, a development worker, who provides training including towel manufacture, packaging, selling, and marketing. The centre’s employees – Lima, Mala, Ontorca, and Sabina, make the product with an eye to quality, but are also excellent at sales. For example, they have extended a delivery service, which is popular for women too shy to come to the centre, and market their product at town fairs.

They told us that they feel good at providing a service to the community. They value being able to help their families financially. They like working with friends. Most importantly, the flexible working hours mean they can fit paid work around other activities, including a partial return to education.

Jamuna to Sirijganj: extract from Valerie Iles’ Diary

Once we left the highway, we [...] passed through villages of weavers, in what (to us) was a most picturesque setting, and arrived at the small boat taking us along the river to Shantir. The river journey took us past people working up to neck deep in the river, a river that will soon be diminishing as the recent monsoon waters recede.

Kate Mulkern’s Travel Notes for Saturday 6th Sept

Most memorable moment
Lovely camaraderie of the 4 girls at Sanimart, so proud of their work, and so business-savvy at such a young age.

Best person you met
Mehrab: yes, technically I met him a few days ago, but this trip would be impossible without him! Also Mrs Selima’s teenage son: he had cerebral palsy, but that hasn’t stopped him learning English, or writing poetry.

What made you stop and think
How could we get electric power to the village at Shantir? Without it, everything is so much harder. Electric lights, battery charging, and small appliances, would help this new-build community so much.

Anything else you want to say
Great group to travel with, and a beautiful country to travel in.
Andrew James Travel Notes for Saturday 6\textsuperscript{th} Sept

\textbf{Most memorable moment}
Seeing the young customer come into Sanimart to buy their product. It showed to me just how valuable this service was to local young girls. Also the enthusiasm of the project workers for their work, the chance to earn money for their schooling, and families.

\textbf{Best person you met}
I liked the local area manager for his enthusiasm and grasp of local issues and the possibilities to address them. Also the boy with palsy at Sanimart [Mrs Selima’s son], who despite his problems was so engaging and spoke English so well.

\textbf{What made you stop and think}
Seeing the way all beneficiaries felt their lives and hopes had been changed by PA, e.g. in the village now they had security from floods and also how the private toilets had made such a difference; the weavers had found self-respect and a way to raise their status; the Sanimart project enhanced so many lives in so many ways.

\textbf{Anything else you want to say}
Each project seemed to generate and tap into a community spirit, so they appeared to ‘own’ the projects without dependency on Practical Action.

Dawn McGahey Travel Notes for Saturday 6\textsuperscript{th} Sept

\textbf{Most memorable moment}
Visiting Shantir village by boat, taking in the fantastic views, and looking round the village and meeting the community face-to-face, and listening to them talk to us.

\textbf{Best person you met}
Shana, who has 3 children, her eldest, a girl, goes to school and her two youngest spend the day with her. She cooks for the family, then cleans and after that, meets with the community.

\textbf{What made you stop and think}
Just how much Practical Action Bangladesh has done to help communities and families to become self-sufficient and the people involved are so passionate about helping the poor people in rural areas.

\textbf{Anything else you want to say}
The weaving project is fascinating to see and last of all the Sanimart project for girls has become successful after working with Practical Action and is now self-sufficient.
Saskia James Travel Notes for Saturday 6th Sept

Most memorable moment
Spending unstructured time with the village people, leading you by the hand into their homes, proudly introducing their smart children, playing and seeing their crafts.

Best person you met
An old woman who I had been introduced to informally, earlier in the day, saw that I was feeling unwell and went to fetch a stool for me to sit on. She fanned me and brushed my hair out of my eyes. It was a beautifully intimate moment. It showed how much she cared - even though I was different, even though I was better off, and even though she must have had bigger problems.

What made you stop and think
How impressively talented the weavers at the village were. They weren't just pressing buttons but designing and multi-tasking, fixing and adjusting, all extraordinarily fast. I couldn't have done it.

Anything else you want to say
Whilst holding a young boy, his mother mentioned that he was unwell with kidney problems. I felt so helpless. It would be easy just to hand over cash. But I couldn't - I can't just go around giving out money. There are ways to do it - Practical Action is a good example - but sometimes, too often, people slip through the gaps.

Women and children at Shantir
Sunday 7th September 2014: Faridpur

We drove south towards Faridpur, which is in the centre of Bangladesh. En route, we stopped at the former home of Rabindranath Tagore, Bangladesh’s Nobel-prize winning poet, and wandered through a small village, getting a feel for local life.

On arrival in Faridpur, we met the town’s mayor to discuss how the municipality and Practical Action were working together, and then we travelled on to see two informal ‘slum’ settlements.

1. Creating a Model Town Settlement at Kaharapara

At this informal settlement, which has become a model for ‘slum’ development, we were welcomed by girls throwing orange blossoms, which was to become a lovely and familiar feature over the coming days.

Azy, a local, told us that before the project, the 350-home settlement was in a deplorable state – drugs, evictions, no community spirit, a municipality which didn’t listen or care, residents with no confidence or skills, and knee-deep filth everywhere. She said: ‘We were nobody. We were afraid to talk to officials’.

Practical Action built a community centre, raised walkways, ran employment skills training sessions, and implemented a household waste management system. Most importantly, we helped them to write a community action plan via participatory workshops, which they used to lobby town councillors. It took two years, but you can’t rush things when you’re building community spirit. Residents described the result as ‘a revolution’. They now have access to decision-makers, and can protect themselves from slum evictions. They said ‘we can raise our voices’.

Case study Mozzan Hossain, aged 40, had a broken toilet before our project – it had filled up, and had cracked, and was pretty much unusable. His two sons got ill, and their financial condition was poor. With our training, he got a better job, and with his family, he attended health and hygiene training. They decided to get a new toilet, with 2 pits. Now their children don’t get ill anymore. He said:

‘Our new toilet is very important – my wife said that without a proper latrine, she couldn’t be happy anymore, and that she didn’t know earlier that it would be so.’

Case Study Hazera Akter Arzu is a 20-year old student who wants to help improve Kaharapara, and her own prospects. So she learned how to sew, and started her own business, while also becoming a community leader so she can take part in municipal lobbying. She said at the beginning, they had big problems in the settlement, but life is so much better now.

Case Study Rani Begum works in the local hospital, looking after children, and is also the settlement’s cashier, collecting fees for services like community hall hire, and banking them. She spoke warmly about the difference the project had made, such as bringing electric light to communal areas, and building drains.
2. Simple Technology for Lives and Livelihoods

From Kaharapara we travelled a short distance to Bisharjan Ghat, which 200 people call home. By now it was dark, but we were met by a large crowd, wanting to show us their community.

**Case Study** Nasrin Akta is married, but her husband works in Saudi and is rarely in the country, so she lives with 2 sisters, a brother, and her father and mother. Practical Action trained her in tailoring 3 years ago, in the community centre, on one of the 10 sewing machines we provided. Now she has her own tailoring business, and is also a trainer, employed by Faridpur Council. She said that her savings will protect her from unexpected problems in the future, and she also wants to start a sewing workshop, run by women.

**Case study** Janu Begum built a low-smoke, fuel-efficient stove in her home, using the training she’d received from Practical Action. She initially kept it outside, but it was getting damaged by monsoon rains, so she brought it into the entrance hall.

Her previous stove – a traditional one – burned many types of fuel including leaves. This new stove only burns small sticks which are more expensive, but as the whole unit is more efficient, it is cost neutral. She loves her new stove because it doesn’t produce smoke, and so she can cook indoors, which is more convenient. The new stove is also easier to cook on, and she’s helped 10 of her neighbours to build themselves an efficient stove too.

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**Saskia James Travel Notes for Sunday 7th Sept**

**Most memorable moment**
Being showered by flowers as you enter the most beautiful slum in Bangladesh. Colour, smiles, interest, and a fantastic community spirit.

**Best person you met**
Major’s female helper/employee, who joined us the next day for breakfast: a fantastic laugh with a real backbone, a passion for her job, and a strong desire to help the people.

**What made you stop and think**
Community pride. The people were proud to own something and to be a key part of its management. This shone through in their clean shirts, immaculate loos, playful children, smiling mothers, and their ‘Sunday best’ clothes.
Kate Mulkern Travel Notes for Sunday 7th Sept

**Most memorable moment**
Everyone up for an early start!

**Best person you met**
Nasrin Akta: gone from being trained as a tailor, to training others, due to high reputation. A real shining light of a person.

**What made you stop and think**
How much of a difference raised pavements make in a flood-prone slum; so easy to overlook, so vital for human dignity.

**Anything else you want to say**
It frustrates me that the thing Practical Action does which makes the biggest, longest lasting, most cost-effective difference - community participation - is also the hardest to ‘sell’ in an appeal letter.

Dawn McGahey Travel Notes for Sunday 7th Sept

**Most memorable moment**
Visiting the Faridpur Practical Action staff and receiving a warm welcome, and being taken to the slum projects in Faridpur.

**Best person you met**
Hazera Akter Arzu, aged 20, who is a student but on the committee for the slums and helps her home area by taking ideas that arise from the meeting, to better her home for family and friends.

**What made you stop and think**
Great to see that by just putting a path into the slum areas, how much pleasure it gives to the people of the community.

**Anything else you want to say**
It’s been a fantastic day and great to see the work of Practical Action Bangladesh is doing to help these people, about whom they feel so passionate.
Andrew James Travel Notes for Sunday 7th Sept

**Most memorable moment**
Arriving at slum community to be showered with flowers by immaculately dressed girls, and seeing the excitement on everyone’s faces. The pride they all took in their community.

**Best person you met**
The Mayor who really seemed to ‘smell the coffee’ and put his municipality before all the other issues.

Also the young mother at Bisharjan, forced to marry at 15, now 22 with a kid. Husband is absent truck driver and drug addict. Just gave air of self-respect and ambition.

**What made you stop and think**
Realising how limited her opportunities were in life and in the future. Thinking how one could improve her situation when any money would be taken, or shared with neighbours, or spent on drugs by her husband.

**Anything else you want to say**
As with most of the projects, it is frustrating to see how much effort is required to help how few people. The quest for funding, and the auditing of it, seemed to take ages.
Monday 8th September 2014: Khulna

Using Biogas: extract from Valerie Iles’ Diary

What did I enjoy about today? The enthusiasm of the people involved in the biogas project. The family getting ready for the post wedding lunch and cooking on their biogas cooker in jute houses with thatched roofs, defrosting beef for the meal in a bucket of water. Meeting the bride and groom and learning that he is about to go back to work in the Middle East.

1. Biogas and Compost from Kitchen and Faecal Waste

Before we left Faridpur district, we visited two waste management projects. At the first, Practical Action is processing kitchen garbage, which is collected from 3,800 homes, and used in one of two ways:

a) Biogas: We saw a prototype construction, which Faridpur’s council is considering building on a much bigger scale. Kitchen waste – vegetable scraps, and so on – is put in an open concrete container to pre-digest for a week, before going into an underground chamber, where it produces sufficient methane to power cooking stoves for 4 houses.

b) Compost: The remainder of collected kitchen waste is turned into compost. Again, this is a prototype because a commercial certificate is needed for larger scale recycling, but the council is considering making a much larger facility, because they can see that it is financially viable.

Case study Asma Akter, aged 28, has one daughter. Her husband is a timber worker, and their family live near Practical Action’s biogas prototype. Because of this proximity, Asma decided to invest in a cooker which is powered by the gas, and hers is one of the four homes which is connected to the supply. When we met her, she was frying fish from her family’s pond for a wedding party. She told us that she loves the stove as she can control its temperature more easily than her old solid-fuel cooker, and it also produces much less smoke. She is proud of her cooking, and said that her children think she’s a great cook!

We also visited a small-scale system to turn faecal sludge into toxin-free compost. It’s needed, because of the widespread adoption of pit latrines. Previously, bacteria from ‘open defecation’ (pooping outdoors) and ‘flying toilets’ (pooping indoors, in a plastic bag, and throwing it out of the window) caused widespread cholera, as human waste contaminated drinking water system. Now pit latrines are becoming common in slum areas, but they haven’t entirely removed the risk of disease. This is because pit emptiers occasionally dump the contents into rivers, which contaminates drinking water. So we’ve developed a way to turn the waste into a valuable commodity – compost.

First, faecal sludge is poured into raised, gravel-and-sand layered ‘beds’, and water added. The temperature is kept high, in order to break down the faecal toxins. They pass through the filtering layers, through a porous sheet at the bottom, through a water pipe, and into a planted reed bed whose roots give a final ‘rinse’, before the (by now clean) water is used for crop irrigation. The toxin-free dried sludge on the top of the beds can then be reused as compost. Practical Action is talking to Bangladesh’s Department of Public Health Engineering about larger scale implementations, so this can become a national solution to the problem of dumping of faecal sludge in rivers.
From Faridpur, we drove to Khulna, in the south of Bangladesh. On arrival, Kate and Dawn went to meet the mayor and then went on to a slum on the city’s outskirts, which showcased local talent spreading the word about good hygiene in a ‘water and sanitation’ project.

2. Community Handwashing Message through Drama, Dance, and Bangla

Diarrhoea is Bangladesh’s number one killer, and it was good to meet people who took the hygiene message so seriously that they wrote, and performed, a Bangla song about it. It’s ‘call and response’ section proved beyond doubt that the 200-strong audience knew all about the importance of using soap, helping children wash their hands, and cleaning the loo. But the show’s real highlight was a children’s play which is certain to launch its 7-year old lead ‘baddy’ actor as a star, such was the enthusiasm with which he portrayed faecal bacteria killing children who fail to wash their hands after using the toilet.

Kate Mulkern Travel Notes for Monday 8th Sept

**Most memorable moment**
Hundreds of people surrounding the car, noisy and buzzing and excited, as we arrived the Community Arts presentation – I felt like Bono playing Croke Park.

**Best person you met**
Mamoud, who was such a good ambassador for faecal sludge management - knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

**What made you stop and think**
It’s great that we’re ahead of the game on faecal sludge management - creating solutions for freshly emerging problems, as slum households in Faridpur have only just got latrines, so consequently have only just got faecal sludge.

**Anything else you want to say**
Mr Chowdrey and Mehrab were great when Dawn and I met the Khulna mayor - their help in putting good questions to him was much appreciated, as I was floundering!

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Dawn McGahey Travel Notes for Monday 8th Sept

**Most memorable moment**
Visiting the Azax-A-CDC Group in Khulna who put a fantastic event on for us, with a play, and music, and presented us with flowers on arrival, absolutely brilliant.

**Best person you met**
Mamoud, who walked around with me and explained the household waste and faecal sludge management projects, also the Mayor of Khulna.

**What made you stop and think**
How friendly and happy the people from the communities are, even when they are living in difficult situations, and make us feel so blessed to have met them.

**Anything else you want to say**
Really enjoyed the day, people are so friendly, and really welcome you into their community.
Tuesday 9th September 2014: Khulna

The Sundarbans: extract from Valerie Iles’ Diary

What did I enjoy about today? Lovely views on the way to Mongla for the boat trip in the Sundarbans. Conversations with Merhab. The walk through the mangrove swamp, seeing crab trees, the light on the water. Lunch on the boat. The boat itself - rather ancient, very rusty, picturesque in a boho chic kind of way!

A day to visit the Unesco Heritage site of the Sundarbans Mangrove Forests. Extending into India, the forests are home to a wide range of species, including crabs, crocodiles, and tigers. We took a boat trip, and walked on raised platforms through the mangroves. Our visit came at the end of the monsoon season, and also at the time of a harvest moon, so the tidal waters were at their maximum height. This, combined with the ‘magic light’ time at dusk, made for an unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime, experience.
Wednesday 10th September 2014: Jessore

Household Waste: extract from Valerie Iles’ Diary

How interesting to see the household waste collection in action and meet the young man removing it in the purpose made rickshaw. Interesting that this is self-sustaining as households will pay to have waste taken away rather than make their way to rat infested refuse dumps themselves. Interesting too to see the role played by community leaders in deciding which households will participate and levying the relevant fees.

We drove back north out of Khulna, to Jessore which has a 20% Hindu population (higher than national average), and 96 high density slums, 6 of which are populated (exclusively) by ‘Harijans’ (low caste Hindus, who often work in cleaning and waste-disposal jobs). Socially excluded, and considered ‘hard to reach’, they are a priority for Practical Action. Helping us to do that is the amazing Lipika Das Gupta, founder and Director of the local NGO DHARA (Development of Health and Agricultural Rehabilitation Advancement). DHARA and Practical Action are helping 2,000 slum residents to create Community Action Plans. Practical Action can deliver some parts of these Plans – for example, drainage – and we can help residents to lobby their town councillors to deliver the remainder.

1. Collecting Household Waste

At a non-Harijan slum, we learned about a household waste collection service, where residents of 210 homes pay a modest fee to dump their kitchen scraps into a bicycle-powered mobile bin, and these scraps are then recycled into compost, and also fed to pigs in a Hindu slum, where residents eat pork.

Case Study Mukti Shaha is married with a young son and daughter. She has used the waste disposal service for 6 months – she comes to her front door when the cart passes at 12:30, and empties the kitchen bucket. She used, like everyone in the street, to use an overflowing dustbin at end of the street for her scraps. It was never emptied, and attracted flies, rats and mosquitoes, and she said that it stank. She likes the collection because it comes right to her door, and the smell is gone. Her family is happier than before, and she thinks it’s good value for money.

Case study Sanjoy, a Harijan collector, is 24, and he operates the bicycle mobile bin. He used to work as a council bin-man, in the richer areas, but told us that it’s better to be working here, on the street, as people are helpful and he likes meeting his customers. He collects in ‘Road # 3’, and from 11-5 each day, wheels his cart, all the time blowing his whistle and calling, ‘Aunty, cousin, sister!’ to attract his (exclusively female) customers. He has a lovely, chatty and joking, relationship with them, even though he is from a different social class. He said, ‘I really feel like I am breaking down caste barriers.’
2. Harijan Settlement Improvement

Everyone who lives in the Dhaka Road informal settlement, which we visited next, is in the Hindu ‘Harijan’ caste. Practical Action has built paths, latrines, washing platforms, and drains. Residents told us that before this work was done, even other international charities wouldn’t visit as it was too muddy. The people living here said of themselves, at the start, ‘we are not even human beings’ and Lipika said one of the project’s most important interventions was to help them explore their voice.

We visited homes, community buildings, and the pig sties residents make good use of kitchen scraps, by turning them into pork.

**Case Study**  
Shakia lives in a 2-room house with her daughter and father, painted green and decorated with Hindu deities. She is a widow whose husband died of liver cancer - not unusual in slums, where drug use and alcoholism are common for men. She is a school cleaner. Before Practical Action, she said that living conditions were deplorable. No-one paid any attention to her community. We first arranged ‘exposure visits’ to more established communities, to give them ideas and motivation. She said of this;

> ‘We saw for ourselves the need to develop, and to educate our children, and to make things better, and to give them the choices which we never had ourselves when we were young.’

She became a community leader – her 8 year old daughter, Sofia, often goes to meetings with her – and Shakia said of the difference this has made;

> ‘I now have dignity, and can act as a go-between. As a woman, it makes me feel proud.’

Before he died, Shakia’s husband said his dream was that Sofia, would finish her education. This is now likely, as she is enrolled, and said with enthusiasm that she loves every school subject.

Dhaka Road Settlement now has frequent access to town councillors, because they have a community action plan, and a process to raise the issues it contains with the municipality. One particular highlight was a visit from the mayor, unthinkable before our project began because of the terrible paths. He came, and he has agreed to help them pressure the slum estate’s owner into improving the houses.

3. Mixed Religion Settlement

Unlike the other two settlements we visited on the 10th September, at the third – Talikhula – Muslims and Hindus live together. Residents were proud to tell us, again and again, that they loved Talikhula for that reason, and that they believed the community was stronger and better for its mix of cultures.

One of the first people we met was Ripon Samare, aged 30, who is the settlement committee’s secretary. Ripon has lived here all his life, and is a graduate accountant who is now studying for an MA. This is not unusual in Talikhula, where 12 residents are studying for masters’ degrees.
We helped the settlement’s residents to formulate a Community Action Plan – every household was represented in this process, and women were consulted as much as men. Practical Action was able to deliver some of the improvements which they wanted, for example building houses, drains, and a new community house. Community Houses are vital in these informal settlements – as well as a meeting space, out of the monsoon rain, they provide a place for training, and for celebrations.

Case study Mohamed Abdul Salam (right) is 70. He teaches children aged 1-5, and has 60 in his class.

He has lived in Talikhula for 17 years, and is highly respected. He told us he has lots of Hindu friends including his best friend, Khitish Chandra Das (left), who is also 70.

The two men celebrate both Eid and Diwali together, and are not considered strange, or unusual, for doing so in this multi-faith, informal settlement.

Andrew James Travel Notes for Wednesday 10th Sept

Most memorable moment

a) Swapping rooms with Dawn [after the Jessore hotel discovered, late in the evening, that it had given Andrew a room on the ‘female’ floor, and Dawn a room on the ‘male’ floor, and insisted they change round].

b) Presentation at Dhana (Lipika’s NGO)

Best person you met

a) Lipika - infectious enthusiasm and drive.

b) Student girls in the slums, obviously bright and wanting to continue studies.

What made you stop and think

The student girls missing the opportunities and benefits of the internet for research, online studies, and email. Two are married already, putting an end to their chances of a career.
Kate Mulkern Travel Notes for Wednesday 10th Sept

**Most memorable moment**
Talking to the ‘untouchable’ caste waste collector, who was trying so hard to bridge the huge social gulf between him and his customers. His optimism that by small acts, small conversations, small shared moments, he can bring the barriers down just a little.

**Best person you met**

a) Lipika - she and I got the giggles when she was translating a committee member’s very long, detailed speech; it made me feel very close to her.

b) Practical Action’s Naymeemur Rahman. It was an activity-packed day, especially the last supper, and we couldn’t have managed to keep to time without him.

**What made you stop and think**
Pigs in the ‘Harijan’ settlement, fed on household waste; something I’d been longing to see. For me, it brought home the benefits of a multicultural, integrated society, where pork-eating Hindus can make use of the pigs which are fed on (bike-bin-collected) kitchen waste scraps. A neat use of a ‘rubbish’ product.

**Anything else you want to say**
Loved the community dance at the end - a real highlight of the trip. Felt honoured to see it. The children in particular were so talented at dancing, and came alive when Lipika joined them onstage.

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**Thursday 11th September 2014: Dhaka**

Dawn, Kate and Valerie had an early morning walk through the quiet streets of Jessore, before returning to the hotel for breakfast with the team. We caught a plane back to Dhaka, as the road journey means crossing several wide, fast rivers, where there are long waits to catch the (hazard-prone) ferries. As a result, we had to say farewell to our calm and collected drivers, Sushanta and Azhar.

We were back in the city in time for a whistle-stop tour of ‘Old Dhaka’, and the narrow-street ‘Hindu’ market area, before a last supper with the senior management team of Practical Action Bangladesh, led by their director Veena Khalique, and attended by David Probin Rozario, who had worked so hard to organise this trip. With a wrench, we also took leave of Mehrab who had been completely invaluable. His knowledge of his country’s history, geography, and culture, and of Practical Action’s projects, was immense. As we flew home on Friday 12th September, we were very sad to say goodbye to beautiful, colourful, Bangladesh, and the amazing people we had met on our journey.

I hope these notes give a sense of our trip, and the deep and lasting impression it made on us all.

If you would like more information, please go to our website, [www.practicalaction.org](http://www.practicalaction.org), or contact Kate Mulkern on 00 44 (0) 1926 634 557, or email [kate.mulkern@practicalaction.org.uk](mailto:kate.mulkern@practicalaction.org.uk).