Projects for Peace
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Train Track to Right Track:
Supporting Bangladeshis Who Call the Railway Tracks Their Home

Peace may mean freedom from disturbances and trouble for most of us. But for many around the world, peace comes from the mere comfort of knowing that you have a roof over your head, food to eat, clothes to wear and loving family and friends by your side. One of such many communities struggling in this way is Bangladesh, a South Asian country of lush greenery and many waterways. However, 24.3% of Bangladeshis live in poverty, and 12.9% live in extreme poverty. 41% of children under the age of five are underweight. And, with over 160 million people, Bangladesh is considered one of the most densely populated countries in the world.

The particular community this project addresses are the poverty-stricken families living along the railway tracks in Bangladesh. Swarms of people ride the trains every day, many on top of the crowded trains as trains go to and from the city. A constant stream of trains roar through the city sending people who live near the tracks, scattering off the tracks to wait for the danger to pass. Locals are seen living their lives near the tracks; many are from villages who have come to the city in search of a better life. Merchants sell their goods, children play, life goes on. For many, a few pieces of tin and tarp assembled along the railway tracks provide a place to call home. Incessant noise and danger are permanent features in these people’s lives as their homes rock to the movement of trains going by while children are held near. Makeshift marketplaces have grown on these tracks, inviting great danger to the lives of people. Extreme poverty disproportionately affects the women and children living on the tracks, who often lack the resources, skills, and opportunities they need to escape the poverty trap. Already a small country, struggling to meet the needs of its citizens, Bangladesh decided to let in hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees escaping the genocide in Myanmar, escalating an already serious humanitarian crisis.

As a Bangladeshi, I have grown accustomed to such scenes. Still, I feel terrible knowing I haven’t done much to help. Growing up, I remember seeing people sleeping on the floor of the rail stations and next to the railway tracks whenever our family made a trip by train. I felt helpless whenever they approached us for change or asked us to buy them something from the station convenience store when I had the privilege of sleeping on a berth compartment. After attending a United World College for High School and learning about Project for Peace, I conceived an idea to finally help.

My proposal has three parts:

1. Give families a start to re-establish their lives. My project will partner with NGO initiative BRAC Bangladesh (https://bracupgi.org/) and connect the families at the railway tracks to their project BRAC UPGI — “Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative” which works to help people to ‘graduate’ themselves from extreme poverty. The goal for my Project for Peace is to use this initiative to work on the local communities in these railway tracks which often go unnoticed. The workshop hub will be located next to the train station. We aim to cover the main train stations at three of the biggest cities in Bangladesh: Dhaka (Kamalapur Railway Station), Chattogram (Railway Station) and Sylhet (Railway Station) - one week allocated to each city. The project will
include working with healthcare volunteers at BRAC and use other resources to offer basic health classes to local women and men living in these railway tracks in the cities. The workshop will involve basic hygiene, family planning, nutrition, prevention of diseases, sanitary and menstrual hygiene.

2. To make this more appealing for the communities we serve, we will organize a food drive and partner with a small local restaurant and prepare a meal box (Biriyani box) that they’re often unable to afford (per meal box for not more than 250 Bangladeshi TAKA(BDT) = $2.5 only) for around 400 people per area. A meal for 250 BDT would be a luxury meal in Bangladesh with a great portion size, but, in dollars, it would only cost around $2.5. Through this we also aim to empower small businesses who will provide the boxes. We will go along the trackways to inform people of the workshop and distribute the meal boxes.

3. Finally, during the workshop, we want to assign people to various government stimulus programs and benefits they could acquire for more sustainable and long-term support. We will connect families to essential social protection programmes and enable them to improve their economic situation, keeping their children fed and in school, with access to healthcare. This way, we can incentivize a long-term solution for these Bangladeshis using a short-term solution—which have been proven to work better when supporting people in extreme humanitarian need. To cover different localities around Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet, myself, along with my friend, who is also a UWC alum, like myself, will travel via train across the country. We will carry out this project (along with help from BRAC) through workshops, food drives, and by connecting families with government and NGO benefits. I will have support from the UWC Bangladesh National Committee, and my Bangladeshi friends who are also UWC alumni have agreed to volunteer for the implementation of this project.