



Director's Report on a Visit to MCC Foundation Cricket Projects in Lebanon

The Shatila camp, Beirut, has a population of some 40,000 Palestinian and Syrian refugees, all living within one square kilometre. There you will find just one secondary school for Syrian refugees, the Alsama Institute, which is the brainchild of a remarkable duo- German publisher, Meike Ziervogel and Syrian teacher, Kadria Hussein. Alsama has a sister school in another camp, Bourj-El Barajneh, also in Beirut. What makes these schools unique, is their exceptional curriculum and pioneering cricket programme, which was set up by Meike's husband, Richard Verity, to complement the education.

As Director of the Foundation, I have just been visiting the Alsama cricket programme which has expanded rapidly since 2019. Accompanying me were our MCCF Head of Operations and 3 coaches, 2 of them from MCC's Community Development Team. There are now more than 400 children playing cricket in 9 Hubs across Lebanon, 4 of which are funded by the Foundation.



Cricket in the Arab world may seem unlikely, but if you saw these players, you would quickly realise that this could be the beginning of another unstoppable wave of cricket- perhaps a second Afghanistan. Hundreds of children are on the waiting list to play. Some students have been playing for 3 years now, receiving up to 6 hours cricket coaching and match play a week and have become talented young coaches. There are now 32 ICC accredited coaches thanks to MCCF's funding and training support. These coaches also play hardball cricket once a week in portable nets held up by breeze blocks.

As I marvelled at the incongruous sight of hard ball cricket in Lebanon, *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* came to mind and the makings of a film....



For these children, cricket gets them out of the camp, away from the cramped, dark rooms which they share with countless family members, into the fresh air and back to childhood. It helps them to forget the trauma of the past and the struggles of the present, to strengthen friendships and develop confidence and skills.

One of our days was spent at Bekaa Valley, visiting the cricket programme which serves the refugees in these communities. They do not have a school like the Alsama children and for many of them, the weekly cricket session is the only structure in their life. We



gathered on a run-down playground, surrounded by tents, where smoke rose from fires and herds of sheep grazed on the arid ground.



The first job of the day was to clear the area of glass and rubbish and make it safe as many of the children have no shoes. The standard of cricket is high and despite the long session, energy levels never flag. Children waiting for their afternoon session were already playing on the field beside the playground long before their session even started.

Violence at home and in the camps is standard. It is a brutal environment. Two of the children had scars from stray bullets on their faces. Their families have no status here, most have lived in tents for more than 6 years. Alsama hopes to open a school here in the future.

What we saw on our visit to Lebanon was that cricket is the glue in the children's lives. Those who play cricket and attend the Alsama institute, are thriving and demonstrate more success in the classroom than those who don't play. They are the leaders of the school. Just 3 years ago, they couldn't even write their own alphabet. Now they speak good English and can write poetry expressing their pain and suffering in a foreign language. They can also score and umpire and know all the international players. The Institute has a satellite dish so that they can all sit crammed into classrooms and watch the T20 World Cup. Ben Stokes is their hero and the school cat is called Jos Buttler!

They love having the UK coaches here and take in all the encouragement and advice, determined to be the cricketers of the future. They feel valued that coaches have come to support them in Lebanon. The Syrian coaches benefit greatly from these coaching visits and feel less isolated. They have ongoing regular weekly online support, but to have coaches here in person makes all the difference.



John Donegan, Harry Thompson, MCC coaches, Angus Berry, MCCF, Lee Booth, coach trainer.



On our last day, we were invited to the Alsama Institute to watch the students, who were performing the beginnings of an opera for which they had spent the week composing the music and libretto through workshops led by an inspiring composer and director in a collaboration from Mascarade Opera, Garsington Opera and The Grange Festival.

All the performers also play cricket in MCCF supported Hubs. They had chosen Amal's story as the central theme of their opera. Amal is an outstanding student and a brilliant young cricketer who excels at bowling. She wrote her story about her brother Malak, aged 11, who is the only male in the family as their father died in the war in Syria. He cannot go to school because he is the breadwinner and spends every day from 3pm to midnight on the streets sifting rubbish for plastic. If he doesn't find enough, he doesn't get paid and gets beaten.

Amal teaches him to read and write in the few hours they have together each day and he attends the MCCF supported cricket Hub sessions on a Sunday-it is his one joy in life and the only time he gets to play and enjoy his childhood. He loves cricket and dreams of playing for Syria one day.

During the performance, a young girl called Maram sang a solo with assured confidence and passion. Maram was due to be married to a cousin when she was just 12 years old but the Alsama Institute worked tirelessly to persuade her parents to stop the arranged marriage and let her stay at school. Now she is a fast bowler and junior cricket coach and, as one of the most outstanding young leaders we have come across, with an uncrushable spirit, she has just been made a Young Ambassador to the MCC Foundation, along with her friend Louay, a remarkable young male leader and cricketer.



To celebrate their appointment as Ambassadors, we arranged a zoom call with Clare Connor, former England Captain and MCCF Trustee and England players, Heather Knight (Captain) and Sophia Dunkley-both Playing Ambassadors for MCCF. It was an inspiring interaction for the children, and especially the girls who have big dreams to play on the international stage.



It was a truly inspiring visit, which demonstrated the power of cricket to transform the lives of our beneficiaries whilst also changing our own lives in ways we could not have foreseen. On my return, I received a biography from Maram for her feature as a Young Ambassador on our website.

Hello, my name is Maram. I'm nearly 16 years old, I am from Syria from der Alzor but I live in shatilla camp in Lebanon, I'm one of Alsama institute students.

I'm addicted to play cricket. Also I'm an assistant cricket coach and proudly say that I am the young ambassador for MCC foundation.

I'm crazy about cricket because when I play cricket I feel I'm like a butterfly moving in the flowers. When I enter the playground I forget all my struggles and pain. I feel that I am alive. Because I don't have the real life but it's okay, life is beautiful no need for tears, need strong lady to fight. And all this confident came because of cricket. Before I was nothing. Today I'm a special thing who can make everything from nothing.

Also as a young ambassador for MCC foundation I want to spread cricket everywhere and in the whole world.

I want to tell young children to be strong and believe in their abilities and they can do it, just go do it. Maram

Sarah Fane Nov 22

If you would like to donate to this project, all **donations can be doubled from midday on 29 November to Midday on 6th December.** [**Find out more**](#)

Please watch our [short film](#) about the project and VOTE for it at the Charity Film Awards!

Read this uplifting [article](#) about the opera project and how cricket and opera are changing lives.