

Nepal Cricket for Equality Project Visit

Report Details

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I have a great affection for Nepal given that it was here where my journey to the MCC Foundation started. Having started a project in the country over 7 years ago, the progress being made from a sporting, social, and economic perspective continues to amaze me every time I return.

On this trip I was treated to the full gambit of our work in the country and met with the full array of partners and individuals who deliver and benefit from our projects. Starting in Kathmandu, the capital, I was invited to the Nepal Premier League, the ongoing T20 franchise competition. Full of star-studded teams and incredible production value the competition is attracting crowds of 15,000 to every single game day. The passion for the game is clear and it's been fantastic to witness the professionalisation of the Cricket Association in recent years.



Figure 1 - TU International Cricket Ground, Kathmandu

Moving swiftly on from Kathmandu I made my way east to Biratnagar, the city on the Indian border with which I have the greatest familiarity. Here I was met by our local implementing partner- the Nepal Cricket Foundation (NCF), run by Abhishek Shrestha, who deliver programmes in Koshi province, one of 7 in the country. First on the agenda was the inaugural 'Orange Cup', a mixed gender schools competition to highlight the 16 Days of Activism in Support of Combating Gender Based Violence. Teams had equal numbers of boys and girls, they had co-captains, and they batted in pairs. 8 schools competed, many of which had only just been introduced to the game by Cricket Without Boundaries (CWB) (more on that later), and a number of players were identified to attend our community sessions where the more talent players engage in training and matches.



Figure 2 - Sunset on the Orange Cup

The following day I moved to town called Pahari (new even for me) where we distributed equipment at a girls' school festival. Again, four schools were competing following the introduction of cricket by CWB volunteers to the town just a few days earlier. Watching on as teams of girls competed so fiercely was a joy and it was made even more special by the hundreds of boys watching on from the sidelines, cheering their classmates to victory.

My next assignment was to see a boys' Inter-Hub competition between players from Biratnagar and Rajbiraj (a city in Madhesh Province). These fixtures followed a series of inter-school competitions in each city where the best players were chosen to represent their Hub. Aged 16 and under, the quality of cricket is exceptional, the vast majority of these players would be in county age sides in the UK with the only things letting them down being match experience and awareness.



Figure 3 - Boys teams from Biratnagar and Rajbiraj

The fixture took place at the aptly named Marylebone Biratnagar Jwala Cricket Ground, a facility that the Foundation funded a couple of years ago. What is clear is that access to facilities is absolutely vital to growing the game in new areas. The ground has become a community focal point where players train and socialise together and has received recent investment from the Cricket Association and held U19 National trials. Whilst not quite Lord's, it's a special place for those to value the impact of cricket in the communities in and around this part of Nepal.



Figure 4 - MCCF funded ground in Biratnagar

As the boys' T20 game came to a close, I met with 10 recipients of the girls' scholarships we fund as part of this project. The scholarships provide each player with free access to daily training at a partner academy in Biratnagar as well as equipment and clothing. I have known some of these girls since they were 13/14 and to see some of them now graduating from college and seeing cricket as genuine career path was truly special. I was also with Sanu Rajbanshi, who came through our programme 5 years ago, went on to play for Nepal U19s and now earns a living coaching in schools across the city. You can see that she's a true role model to her friends, her community, and importantly to many of boys as well. She is a true success story not only of this programme but of her community also.

An early start followed for a 5-hour drive to meet up with a team of CWB volunteers who were now in Lahan, in Madhesh Province. Madhesh is, by all indicators, the poorest and least developed area of Nepal. Attitudes towards gender, ethnicity, and class lead to

harmful norms perpetuating inequality across the region and it is these that we are seeking to challenge through cricket.



Figure 5 - CWB school coaching session, Lahan

Our partnership with CWB not only enables us to access their expertise in coach development and social change but it also enables us to work with their teams of volunteers who visit countries to provide introduction to cricket and mass participation sessions (think Chance to Shine on steroids). They had just spent a week in Koshi Province, where I benefitted from seeing the (very recent) legacy of their interactions and I joined them halfway through their Madhesh leg. Arriving at a school following my (rather bumpy) 5-hour journey I was greeted by the sight of over 300 kids playing cricket on a massive school field. 5 minutes later I was helping run a game of softball cricket.

The volunteers brought a range of experience to the project including a Chance to Shine employee, a level 3 coach from Essex, a gender specialist, and one former MCC Foundation trustee in Paul Bedford! After a couple of days of coaching (the most tiring part of the whole trip) I moved onto Rajbiraj, the heart of our work in Madhesh, to meet with local NGO Sabal Nepal, who deliver locally.

Without a doubt Sabal are one of the most innovative and forward-thinking organisations that I've had the pleasure to work with. Given my above description of Madhesh Province, you'll be surprised to hear that their management board is over 60% female, and they employ hundreds of people from so call 'lower' castes.



Figure 6 - Angus with former MCCF Trustee, Paul Bedford

After an inspirational day reflecting on our partnership to date, planning for the next 12 months, and eating a homemade duck curry, the stage was set for the Dignified Menstruation Cup. This tournament has become a focal point for Sabal. Using youth leaders in the community the need for visible competitions for girls to showcase their skills was highlighted. These competitions then also provide a platform to engage on pressing topics which are close to the girls' hearts. Thus, the Dignified Menstruation Cup was born, bringing together teams of girls who have come through our schools and community programmes over the last couple of years. When I first game to this city there weren't enough girls playing to field an 8 a side softball team, this year over 40 girls trialled to play in this hardball tournament.



Figure 7 - Dignified Menstruation Cup

Credit goes to Sabal and CWB for the work they have done with girls in the community and for their work with parents and community groups to change attitudes around girls playing sport. I have multiple videos-now being translated- which talk directly to the incredible work being done!



Figure 8 - Four members of the winning DMC team

The tournament was a great success with high quality cricket again on show, many of the girls would easily compete in our Hubs in the UK and two (both aged 16) are in the training group for Nepal's U19s ahead of their maiden World Cup appearance next year. The only thing that was left for me to do in Rajbiraj was to see the opening of a new toilet at a community ground in the city. Again, the girls pressed home the need for adequate toilet facilities as being vital to breaking down the barriers for girls staying in the game. So, a new community asset was born, resplendent with painted MCCF logo (don't tell the branding people!).

The usual 35-minute flight back to Kathmandu was cancelled (as was the following day's entire schedule) so a 12-hour overnight car journey through the hills to the capital was endured, not helped by a bout of food poisoning.

Finally, back in Kathmandu I returned once more to TU University Ground, home of the NPL, to meet with Paras Khadka, secretary of the Cricket Association of Nepal. After years of trying (and failing) to work constructively with CAN, Paras and I spoke at great length about the impact the Foundation is having in Nepal, about the role we are playing

in growing the women and girls' game, and about how, together we could deliver a transformative programme of change across the country.



Figure 9 - Angus with Paras Khadka, CAN Secretary

I'm lucky to have seen the growth of this project from an idea in my head 7 years ago, to it today, turbocharged by the MCC Foundation. I have seen genuine change not just in those 7 years but in the 18 months since my last visit with my CEO, Sarah. I see communities, and girls in particular, transformed by cricket. Cricket in Nepal is flourishing and we can be proud of the part we continue to play in it doing so.

Angus Berry, Operations Director

Overview of MCCF Project Sites in Nepal

