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Reflections on a visit to MCCF's Lebanon cricket projects for Syrian Refugees, February 2022

Shatila, a 1km square encampment housing between 20-40,000 Syrian and Palestinian refugees, sprawls vertically. Its poorly constructed homes are perched impossibly one on top of another in a desperate bid to house its abandoned people, until the sky is obliterated and the damp seeps in, pervading every inch of habitation. Living here is an existence, a survival, a life devoid of hope.



Shatila is a fiery hell in summer, cold to the bone in winter. A tangle of electric cables ensnares its buzzing alley ways, dangling precariously, just missing bowed heads, deflecting the scarce rays of light which filter down. It seems as if these wires are holding the very walls together. Here there is barely room for people, less still for hope.





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The camp, abandoned by the world, governed by factions, ruled by guns, supports thousands who are banned from working in Lebanon, who lack papers, who give birth to children who do not exist, lost citizens recognised by no country.

Every inch of space is used, every machine recycled, remade, repurposed. The tailors, the cobblers, the barbers, the food merchants, the repair shops, the coffee stalls all compete for space along the narrow alleys.

Yet in this place which bubbles with strife, where no Lebanese police, firefighters, ambulances, or refuse collectors will go; where the air is stale and whole extended families squeeze into one room; where abuse thrives, hope is stifled, future is blighted, we find the brightest light.



Alsama (Translation: The Sky)

The moment you enter this building, you feel the difference. The happy hum of voices, the clean stairs, the freshly painted walls, and the radiant smiles of every child you meet. The home of hope, the brainchild and endeavour of 2 women, one Syrian, one German, Khadria and Meike. It truly seems impossible to believe that a place of such utter excellence is thriving in this ghetto of despair. It cannot fail to impress, to inspire and to change forever the life of any visitor privileged enough to visit.





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Alsama is a secondary school for 200 Syrian refugees in Shatila. Its classes are delivered according to the standard of education of each individual, not their age. Its motto is *commitment, collaboration, ambition*. Any child fortunate enough to come here knows well that if they are late or fail to turn up 3 times without a very good reason, they cannot return. No second chances here, the places too precious, absolute commitment needed. In just 2 years this place has become a thriving centre of excellence. Children who were barely educated, study maths, Arabic and English as core subjects. Added to this are yoga, awareness, leadership, poetry, creative writing and.... cricket!



These children come from Rakka. They have seen war, witnessed atrocities, cowered in cellars beneath the bombing, lost family and friends and made journeys of terror to escape teenage marriage as ISIS brides, only to arrive at Shatila, a place which starves them of any future. But they have Alsama, and they have grabbed this opportunity and soared and flowered and I have never met children as determined, talented and brave. They embrace every opportunity which comes their way. All their learning relates to reality, to the world in which they live. What you notice most is their allegiance to each other. They are a chain, each of them a link and they have an indestructible bond which holds them tight together. They encourage each other, the boys respect the girls and talk of feminism, they are there one hundred percent for each other and if ever one falters, their friends' hands go out to support.





And then there is the cricket. We talk of transforming lives through cricket and when you visit the cricket projects in Lebanon, you absolutely believe that this is what cricket is doing. Meike's husband Richard, a McKinsey consultant, started the cricket 3 years ago when on a sabbatical in Lebanon, by inviting a few children to come and play in Shatila. A handful turned up, but when he returned next day, numbers had multiplied and soon he realised there was a huge desire for children to play. He started cricket hubs offering coaching 6 hours a week. Capital Kids Cricket came out from the UK to coach the first Arabic coaches, and soon it took off. Now there are 8 hubs of 40 children -2 in Bekaa Valley encampment, 2 in Bourj el Barajneh, 3 in Shatila and 1 at a Lebanese High School. MCC Foundation supports 4 of these and funded a recent coaching visit from the UK.



The cricket goes hand in hand with the education offered by Alsama at the 3 camps and a recent survey showed how those who play cricket are thriving in the classroom. The cricket offers so much- not just the confidence and sense of a team, the self-discipline and the mental wellbeing from playing a sport, but a real chance to forget any anxieties and to be a child. The young cricketers are fiercely competitive and totally committed and play every week of the year. There is no green space in the camp, so buses are arranged to take them to playgrounds. Now, some of the original players are so good, that they have become junior coaches to the new hubs and are developing great skills as teachers and leaders.





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So, it is this project which we have come to visit...I as Director of MCC Foundation, James Bailey, our Comms expert, Guy Lavender, Chief Executive of MCC, Clare Connor, Trustee of MCCF and President of MCC and Mehmooda Duke, Trustee of MCCF and Alsama supporter. The Alsama children receive few visitors and are delighted to have us and very excited and inspired to meet a woman who once captained her national side.



We visit all the Hubs, travelling between the camps and playing alongside the children 6 or 7 hours a day. The exuberance and determination on display is a joy to witness. Girls play alongside boys and often outplay them. The freedom they feel to escape the confines of the camps is evident, their energy boundless, their athleticism extraordinary. But most impressive is the way they treat each other with such respect, love and encouragement. They take extraordinary care over me, as I struggle to grip the bat correctly and attempt my first forward defence!





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We visit Bekaa Valley on a day of atrocious weather, the icy wind heavy with torrential rain, which mixes with mud and snow to create quagmires in the tented areas. We visit the Hubs, where throngs of children do cricket drills in bleak playgrounds, playing with such gusto we are caught up in the joy and find ourselves exhausted as we try to keep up. Clare is asked to bat. It is the first time she has picked up a bat for 8 years and all the children line up to try and bowl her out. It is a marvellous sight and it is as if she had never stopped playing. No one succeeds in getting her out, though there is real talent on display. She coaches the players and results are instantly evident as the advice is taken up, and then the look of elation lights up their faces as they see their bowling or batting transformed.



Coach Guy, as he is quickly named, lines up with the children and they love to show off their skills to him and race him between the wickets, overjoyed that a foreigner- and someone who runs the Home of Cricket- has come to visit this forgotten backwater.





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We are invited to have tea in one of the tents. We slip and slide to get there, under skies pregnant with icy rain. The tented areas could not look more miserable. Often placed near rubbish tips, they are made from white plastic sheeting donated by UNHCR, with rooves held down by tyres.



It is hard to know how people survive, stuck here, unable to return to Syria, unable to work in Lebanon, a forgotten people, who cannot progress or believe in a better future. Yet, once again, we are taken aback by what we find. For in these tents, the women strive to create homes out of nothing, to keep order in chaos, to keep things immaculate despite the mud and rubbish at their doors. They show us with pride their tent homes, the room where all the children sleep on makeshift beds, the tiny kitchens with windows cut through the canvas letting in some light, but also the freezing wind. And they smile and welcome us. These are the female cricket coaches, who are now earning money and keeping their families, carving a future from the void.





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As we say goodbye, a young cricketer from the project approaches Clare and slips her a note saying, *I love cricket, I love you.*

Cricket is the only structure for these Bekaa camp children, and it is a lifeline. They never miss a session, they fashion bats from any wood they can find, they dream of playing for Lebanon...or perhaps even their beloved Syria one day. Their coaches are their role models, their teammates are their firm friends in this harsh new world.

As we return to Beirut none of us is left unaffected by what we have seen. The joy and the despair, the lives made so much more bearable by the cricket.



A highlight of the trip is a dinner, arranged by Alsama, for all the coaches from Bekaa, Bourj-el Barajneh and Shatila, the junior coaches who are the young pupils from Shatila, and all of us. The children have never been out to dinner before, and we all sit at a long table in a Beirut restaurant and have the most wonderful meal. They then stand to recite poetry, one by one. These poems are their expression of what has been, what is and how they see the future. It is a window into a terrible world, but one where they refuse to give in. They talk of the terror of the past, the stifling present and their dreams for the future, but most of all they express their commitment to creating a better future for themselves and their people. They recite by heart, in English, full of confidence and passion.





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On our penultimate day, a tournament is held between all the Hubs. They come together at the playground, representatives from the British Embassy and journalists in attendance, and 12 teams battle fiercely to win the coveted prize of a bat signed by the entire Pakistan cricket team. It is incredible how many children are playing cricket and how many of them display real talent. It is an inspiration for us to see our projects in action and to realise that all our efforts to support are bearing such fruit and bringing such joy.



Our last hours are spent at the school, where there is a music project under way. Garsington Opera will be staging a newly commissioned opera called Dalia, this summer. It is about a Syrian refugee who comes to the UK and despite all her struggles, finds joy through playing cricket. A young tenor has come out to teach one of the songs and chorus from the opera to the children. Within a few hours, they go from children who could not hold a note together, to a choir who take huge pride in performing. We are treated to a performance of Dalia's song, of Syrian folksongs and poetry. It is impossible to describe the emotions of that performance. One girl, with scars on her cheeks, inflicted when her face was held down against a stove, stands up and sings beautifully a haunting solo of a Syrian folk tune. A young cricketer who has had to overcome extraordinary challenges recites her poem and then sings. The entire group takes part and seeing the pride they feel at performing music for the first time and discovering their voices is a very humbling experience.





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Saying goodbye is very difficult and very sad and we are all given heartfelt hugs from these children who have so little yet give so much.



We have learned so much from this experience, from the children and their inspiring coaches and teachers. We have also seen the true spirit of cricket and its transformative power at a time when we are struggling back at home to remember the pure joy of the game. It is a great illustration of the impact that MCC brand and MCC Foundation can create together, leading to positive change for young people who live under extremely challenging circumstances, and the spread of cricket to new parts of the world.

