

COMMUNITY ACTION NEPAL (CAN)

Doug Scott, based in the UK, is the Operational Director and Founder of UK registered charity, Community Action Nepal (CAN). He gave an inspiring presentation of the on-going work in Nepal. The idea originated from a desire to give back to the country where he and fellow climbers had experienced so much pleasure climbing the mountains. When at a later stage he stopped to reflect on the working conditions of the porters, he was appalled at their poverty. Although carrying loads of up to 60 kgs on their backs, often barefoot or in flip flops, many had no access to adequate shelter or food, and often suffered from mountain sickness, as they were recruited in the lowlands.

He first became aware of major problems when he and his friends were in the village of Askole in the Karakorum range. He was told there was a 50% child mortality rate due mostly to diarrhoea/enteritis as a result of villagers drinking water from a stream fed by water from fields fertilised by human and animal excreta. With a £10,000 grant from the Aga Khan Foundation the village was linked to a spring and 17 stand-pipes were put in. Then, after a few years, many more children were living beyond the age of five. Doug managed to facilitate this without even getting his hands dirty. He also raised additional funds from climbing organisations in Britain and the USA. This gave him the confidence to respond to requests for help in Nepal from the people who had helped him to climb the mountains there.

The remote hill and mountain areas had few health and education facilities. The villagers were so poor some did not even know what money was. Over the years CAN has set up health posts, basic schooling and introduced income generation projects. CAN nurses at the health posts are aware of community problems such as child disability. These children might be hidden away due to stigma and shame. The highly trained nurses also have basic dentistry skills. Away from the big cities, there are no dentists. The nurses give health education to both the school children and Mothers' Groups. CAN considers Mothers' Groups tend to be more efficient, they put the money where it is best needed and they can handle basic finances. CAN also encourages the setting up of agricultural schemes which can be self-supporting and sustainable, buying up agricultural land which is then handed back to the communities.

The CAN office in Kathmandu looks after the administration of funds sent quarterly from the UK on receipt of detailed expenditure records. Most of the income is from donors in the UK, school sponsoring schemes, and funds raised from Doug's extensive Lecture Tours.

Through UK contacts CAN is able to send out doctors, dentists, teachers and other specialists who give their time and expertise not just to treat suffering, but also to help train the nurses and other local staff. Doug told of his own dentist who, at a CAN project site, pulled out 350 teeth in three days, finishing up with a bucket full of teeth to prove it.

Doug also mentioned his meeting with a Maoist Insurgent who demanded a contribution for the Maoist cause. Doug said he couldn't do that with donors' funds

but he was prepared to help the local Maoists overcome their top-heavy hierarchy that made it difficult and wasteful for them to help local people. In fact Doug told him he thought CAN was more Maoist than the Maoists in some ways!

CAN is setting up vocational schemes to give people in rural areas skills and training, and to help to stop the population drift into the big cities, where even basic facilities, such as electricity, water and sewage are strained. To prevent "Donor Dependency Syndrome", Communities are required to cover at least one third of the project cost. Absolute transparency is a requirement. At the first sign of fiddling of funds, the project is stopped. Conditions for porters have improved through collaboration with organisations such as Tourism Concern, the International Porter Protection Group and Porters Progress UK.

Mans' basic instinct is "to care". The rural people of Nepal go out of their way to share what little they have, they are wonderfully hospitable and caring whenever they see a foreigner in their midst - such as offering water which has been carried from afar. How different from the West. But it is this which inspires people like Doug Scott, CAN Patron, Chris Bonington and many others in Nepal and the UK to work tirelessly and to give something back to a people who have given them so much in their former, mountaineering days.

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