

CHANGING PEOPLE'S LIVES

What makes a successful Swiss banker leave his beautiful country and dedicate his life to helping the seriously underprivileged in Bali? We met and talked to Daniel Elber about his life and work and how his organisation has changed the lives of thousands of Balinese, in this continuing series of interviews with people who have dedicated their lives to helping the underprivileged.

This year, NOW! Bali is seeking out the people who come to Bali not to profit and plunder, or to industrialize the island, but those who genuinely work to help the poor, the destitute, the sick and the forgotten. We started in January with John Fawcett and his cataract operations, followed up with David Booth and his East Bali Poverty Project, now we are proud to feature the Muntigunung Project and its founder. Read, learn and see how you can help.

Can you tell us about your background, future plans and your motivation for what you do?

I am from Switzerland, a 59-year-old father of three already-grown-up children and a former managing director of a big bank.

During my professional career, I already used my spare time to support non-profit organisations, specifically one that has been helping mentally disabled children to improve their talents in music, painting and theatre.

In contrast to the work at the bank, I always liked the down-to-earth approach of helping others and giving something back to those who do not lead such a privileged life as I.

My involvement in eradicating poverty arose from a coincidence, but I follow this long journey now because I am in a position to give something back and because it's a very powerful and motivating feeling to see that one can create a future for other people simply by investing his own skills.

I live in Nyu Kuning near Ubud. The Muntigunung program will certainly continue for another 8 to 10 years, so I intend to stay in Bali, and return to my country, Switzerland, only for fundraising purposes.

When and how did the problems facing the people of Muntigunung come to attention?

In 2003 I came to Bali for a sabbatical after having spent more than 35 years in the banking environment. My objective at that time was to recover from the hard work at the bank and to think about future professional perspectives. During my time in Bali I encountered on the streets of Ubud and Kuta many beggar women with small children. I was wondering

about their situation because to me, the Balinese culture and begging do not fit. So I tried to get additional information and one day in 2004, I visited the area of Muntigunung in the dry northeast of Bali.

I realized very fast that Muntigunung and the areas around it were not the Bali I knew, and that the people living there were facing a very hard and difficult situation. They had no access to water, no work, income or education, no access to medical services, and many were malnourished.

Would this sort of thing matter to Swiss people?

At first, it mattered only to me. Returning from Muntigunung that very night, my mind and heart full of this difficult situation, I decided to stop everything [I'd been doing] in Switzerland before and start organizing help for the Muntigunung people.

What did you do to begin with? How did you identify the problems, and more importantly, the solutions?

The most important point at the beginning was to realize that I have no background as a development specialist; that I was lacking basic knowledge and that I had no idea how to help. The first task was therefore to identify people and organizations considered as professionals in this field of expertise. Discussions with leading development and water supply experts in Switzerland resulted in contact [with] the most well-reputed, non-profit organization in Indonesia: Yayasan Dian Desa from Yogyakarta. One day I met with Anton Soediarwo, the Head of this organization and Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2008, and discussed with him the situation in Muntigunung. After visiting the area together, we decided to conduct a

thorough assessment of the situation (including village consultation meetings) in order to understand the situation of the villagers and to come up with strategies, options and project plans.

It seems that it was a lack of water that fueled a vicious cycle of poverty, eventually forcing the villagers to beg in order to survive. How did you begin the process of change?

You are absolutely right. The area of Muntigunung covers 28 km² at altitudes between 200 and 800 metres above sea level. More than 5500 people live in this area, where there are no rivers, no springs and no sources of water except [for] Lake Batur or the coastal area where there is groundwater. This situation means people have to transport water daily from so far a source that it takes 2-5 hours there and back; which is crucial to their survival but leaves no time for them to seek income, so [they turn to] begging.

The results of the Muntigunung Assessment showed that it is possible to solve the problems together by providing a sustainable water supply as a first priority; by capacity building processes and income-generating activities as a second step; and by improving [people's] health and education as a third step.

I then formed 'Future for Children' in Switzerland, an association with the objective [of] raising funds to finance the development projects in Muntigunung. I partnered with Yayasan Dian Desa for their experience in development projects and their understanding of the Indonesian culture, to manage the program.

Who has been the driving force behind the project? It seems that a number of prominent Swiss citizens have provided funding, but who runs it overall?

People would probably consider me the driving force behind the Development Program in Muntigunung, as I started to organize help and convinced people to participate. In the meantime there are more than 300 members and around 500 donors from Switzerland who assure that the projects can be funded properly. The board of 'Future for Children' consists of 8 Board Members, who decide on the strategy, the operational activities and the funding. As a Vice President of the Board, I oversee the projects in Bali, which are managed and executed generally by our partners, Yayasan Dian Desa.