

# GREENSPEAK

by Ibu Kat

## OUT OF THE DUST

The beggar women of Ubud have become an integral part of the landscape. With a plastic bag of belongings balanced on their heads, babies at the breast and toddlers at their sides, they crouch on the sidewalks around town with dusty palms outstretched. People say they're organized by a Mafia that rotates them through different tourist centres by truck at night. Others say they come from a village where begging is an established old tradition. I wanted to get to the bottom of this; what was the real story of the Ubud beggar women?

The trail led quickly to Daniel, a retired Swiss banker who encountered the beggar women during a year-long sabbatical in Ubud four years ago. Curious and concerned, he drove a motorbike through Karangasem to try and find out where they came from. It took him three days to locate the area of Muntigunung where most of Bali's beggars originate. What he learned about their lives inspired him to return permanently to Bali and to set up a long-term program, together with many friends in Bali and abroad, to help lead the villages out of poverty.

Bali is a land of milk and honey for some Balinese, and dust and despair for others. In the arid mountains between Amed and Tejakula are, among others, 34 small settlements where about 5,500 people exist in the direst imaginable poverty. In the dry season, there is no water at all — no permanent rivers, streams or springs. Most families have a small, uncovered cistern which loses most of the collected rainwater through leakage and evaporation. So the women and children walk between two and five hours every day on steep trails to the coast or to Lake Batur to collect 25 litres of water — a heavy load for anyone, but especially for a malnourished woman walking uphill with a baby in her hip in temperatures that reach 40 degrees.

"We made a rough calculation of the families who must collect water for the seven to eight month dry period," explains Daniel. "We came to the conclusion that literally millions of hours a year were being spent on journeys to collect water. Their only other option is to purchase water from a dealer at high prices. If we had to carry water for hours every day in those conditions, we wouldn't have enough energy to work either."

For years, the women have been organizing themselves into teams which each go to different tourist centres. They walk four hours to the nearest bemo stand, drive hours more to their destinations, and beg and live on the streets until they have enough money to feed their families for a few more days. Eighty percent of these people have never attended school and are illiterate in any language. There's no access to health services; infant and maternal mortality are very high. The men drag a few crops from the reluctant earth during the rainy season, but hardly enough for their own needs; there's not much left to sell. Literally the only income these villages can generate is from begging, which brings in about Rp 100,000 a month per person — well below the official poverty level. The work ethic is a foreign concept in communities where chronic dehydration and malnutrition go hand in hand with isolation and ignorance. Begging has indeed become a tradition here.

Leading these communities to self-sufficiency is a long, slow journey. "The biggest learning point for me has been not to rush toward a solution. Development must be slow and organic in order to be socially responsible," says Daniel. "We research everything thoroughly, consult with the community and then put one small project in place. Any problems that

arise from that are solved before replicating the project in other villages. It will probably take about three years to bring each village to some kind of self-sufficiency."

Working with highly reputed Indonesian Yayasan Dian Desa, Daniel has spent the past three years researching the conditions in the villages and consulting with the villagers about their priorities. Unsurprisingly, the people's primary concerns were water and income generation. The initial in-depth study took four months and included professionals from many fields. A plan to pump water from the coast or dwindling Lake Batur was found to be unviable due to the high cost of fuel for the pump and the difficulty of maintaining 25 km of pipes. The simplest solution is usually the best in developing areas; it was decided to build rainwater cisterns in each village. First, each family's tank was renovated and now holds enough water for about three months. But this isn't enough to see people through the dry season. Large, covered communal tanks holding 180 – 280 cubic metres of water were designed and have almost been completed in five villages. The water collection roofs were strategically designed for use at a later stage to provide shelter for meeting or production venues, a village school or training centre. From next year, 800 people will have enough water for drinking, cooking, washing and small-scale gardening all year round. Eventually, all the villages will have a tank.

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Dian Desa also addressed the drinking water issue by introducing the Sodis ([www.sodis.com](http://www.sodis.com)) water purification method to Bali. This simple, sustainable technique uses heat and ultra-violet rays from sunlight to kill bacteria in the rainwater within six hours.

"The village has to participate if they want a water tank. We require that each community clean up all the plastic waste in the village and provide the labour to build the tanks." Bringing water to the villagers is the first step on their path to self-reliance. Next will come livelihood development. Households will learn to produce and process products grown with waste water delivered by a drip/trickle irrigation system to optimize scarce water resources. Markets will be found for their products.

There are very few beggar women in Ubud these days. They are back in their village learning to lead treks for tourists -- along the same steep trails they used to follow on their journey to town. Daniel and his friends look forward to the day when women from all these villages will be able to generate more income in their own environments than they can from begging and create a brighter future for their children.

The Buddha said, "Wisdom and Compassion are like two wings. You cannot fly with one alone." It's wise to build cisterns, but until the new programs are in place these people have to eat. Regardless of government decrees, compassion dictates that we share a few rupiah with them until they can rise out of the dust.



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