GREENSPEAK

by Ibu Kat

LEARNING TO FISH WHERE THERE IS NO RIVER

People sometimes say to me, "Surely there can't be poverty on Bali." Indeed there is. Bali's northeast is home to thousands of people living at a subsistence level, without permanent water supplies or access to productive employment. The only sign of poverty in the more prosperous parts of Bali are the women and children who beg by the roadside in Kuta, Denpasar and Ubud. They are among the 5,500 people from 35 poor villages high on the slopes of Muntigunung in Karangasem, the driest area of Bali. Recently I visited one of these villages to see the situation for myself.

Contrary to rumour, there is no 'mafia' behind the beggar women. They come to town when the money runs out. First they walk for several hours down the mountain to a road where they catch a bemo for the long, hot journey to their destination. They organize themselves into small groups because it makes them feel more secure and they can keep an eye on each other's children. They know the best places to beg in the towns, where to bathe and sleep and where to hide from the police. They're very shy about having to beg, and don't like to talk about it. When they've made Rp 100,000 or so, they make their way back to the mountain to buy food and necessities for their families.

A Sustainable water supply in each village is the first goal

Situated on the steep slopes between Tulamben and Tejakula on the rugged slopes of Mount Batur, the 28 square km area or dusun of Muntigunung ranges between 200 and 900 metres above sea level. There are no springs or rivers here, and the soil is too dry to farm for eight months of the year. Thirteen of the upper villages have no road access and are too remote for government education or health services. Malnourished and without education or resources, these people are outside of the development mainstream. Years ago they turned to begging as their only means of generating cash.

I recognized several of these women from the days when they would crouch outside the Bali Buddha in Ubud with their hands outstretched for coins. Today their hands are busy weaving strips of lontar into hats, for which they receive a daily salary

Begging women and their children used to be a common sight in Ubud. These days the numbers are much reduced, thanks to a multi-faceted Swiss-funded project, the Futures for Children Foundation. The Foundation is providing water and income generation activities to these impoverished villagers for the first time. The project's first strategic priority is to supply a sustainable water supply for each village. Then a capacity-building process begins, teaching villagers income-generating activities using local commodities and services. Eventually, as nutritional profiles for the children improve, an educational component will be integrated.

We drove around Kintamani and south past Tejekula, then headed up the mountain. The road was increasingly steep, narrow and rough, and finally faded out altogether. Leaving the car at the end of the track we pulled on knapsacks and started hiking up the almost vertical path toward Cangkeng, the first village the project began to work with in October 2006. The heat was fierce. Now that I could see the distances and difficulty involved in obtaining water, I began to understand more fully how people who have to struggle so hard for the basics of life have little energy for anything else.

Access to water was the most crucial of their needs. One woman told me that she would leave her house at 5 pm when the sun was low and walk to the bottom of the mountain, fill her 15-litre bucket and hike the steep trail back to her home at 10 pm. That one bucket of water was all her family had in the long dry season for drinking and cooking. There was never any left for washing clothes or bathing. Today, every household has a secure rain water tank and the village shares a 250 cubic meter community rainwater cistern, ensuring each person at least 25 litres a day throughout the year.

With water provided for, the next step was to bring sustainable income generating activities to the village. The Foundation strongly believes in the philosophy that if you give a poor man a fish you feed him for a day, but if you teach him how to fish he can feed himself for life. "We wanted to prove that begging was not a tradition, that there was a way to solve this," a spokesman explains. "If the villagers could be taught to earn a sustainable income, there would be no need to beg." But how to teach these women to fish in a culture where handouts had become the norm?

In fact, the women embraced the concept with relief. They were embarrassed to beg and much preferred not to leave their villages. The first project was to develop a 3-hour trek with the village women guiding visitors through the remote and spectacular landscapes of East Bali to their villages. Marketed through Bali Rasa Sayang Tour and Travel, this project has proved very popular with European and North American tourists who are delighted to have access to a part of Bali they would normally never see. About 250 people have taken the trek to date. Part of the money earned from the treks is paid to the women in cash, part is held for them against times of need and part is saved for the education of their children. The women are very happy with this arrangement.

The next project was the production of woven lontar hats and baskets. The Foundation learned that one of Bali's major hotels needed a large number of broad-brimmed hats, and the women quickly learned to produce them. The day I visited, we could hear the women long before we could see them. As we climbed up through the village toward the big community water tank, the sounds of women talking and laughing grew louder. About 25 women sat companionably working together under the spacious aluminium rain-catching roof of the tank, surrounded by slumbering babies and toddlers. I recognized several of these women from the days when they would crouch outside the Bali Buddha in Ubud with their hands outstretched for coins. Today their hands are busy weaving strips of lontar into hats, for which they receive a daily salary. The older children, who used to beg alongside their mothers, are helping to cut and beat the lontar. Why aren't they in school? There isn't one. Yet.

Every family of the village was represented, and the women now make six times as much as they did from begging. They're above the poverty line for the first time; the children see their mothers working and have a positive role model to follow. The Foundation is bringing in international designers to help create stylish, high-quality hats and bags that will ensure ongoing orders. Research on vegetable dyes for lontar is underway.

The Foundation has built a Development Centre further down the mountain where training and commodity processing takes place under the management of Dian Desa, an Indonesian NGO with wide experience in village-based sustainable income programs. The Centre's goal is to improve the value of existing products in Muntigunung and market them in Bali.

Some of the villages were offered the opportunity to grow Rosella flowers, which are easy to cultivate. The villagers that agreed to try this new crop are now harvesting the flowers. The Rosella growers can make Rp 20,000 a day by selling the flowers to the Centre, and up to ten people are employed to cut out the seeds, dry the flowers in the Centre's solar dryers and package them for sale. The bright red Rosella flowers contain high levels of the anti-oxidant carotene, and drying them in a solar dryer instead of in the sun maintains the colour and integrity of the active ingredient.

Top quality cashews and Rosella tea from the project can be found at Bali Buddha

High quality red palm sugar powder has a better market value than the cakes. The sugar is made from the lontar pine, of which about 3,500 are growing in the villages and which also supply the lontar for the hats. The sugar is processed in a hygienic kitchen at the Centre and packaged for sale.

During the cashew season, villagers bring in the nuts and sell them to the Centre where they are dried, cracked, dried again and packaged for sale to participating hotels. Last year two tons of high quality cashews were processed at the Centre and 29 people were employed for four months. The crop from 2008 was completely pre-sold to several hotels; next year, the Centre hopes to process four tons, the equivalent of half the area's output.

All of the products are of the highest quality to meet the exacting standards of the five-star hotels which buy them.

It's a very slow process, but eventually all 35 villages will have rainwater catchment tanks and income generation options. The key to making this program successful and sustainable is for our communities in Bali to engage in this project by buying the villagers' products. We all need to be involved, especially Bali's hotels and expat community.

Women who once begged for a living now lead treks and weave hats and baskest

Seven villages now have a sustainable water supply. Besides Cangkeng, the other six also have partial employment. The villages use a lottery system to decide which will be the next to get water. At each lottery, one village with road access and one without is chosen. Four villages will get water tanks in 2009.

The remaining beggars still to be seen in Ubud are from the villages of Kulkul Satu and Kulkul Dua. Their villages will receive rainwater catchment tanks this year with funding from Rotary Club of Bali Ubud and two Rotary Clubs from Switzerland (Zurich Weinland and Zurich Glattal).

Thanks to increasing support of the members of the Bali Hotel Association and Bali Buddha, the dream of keeping Bali' s begging people in their homes and helping them to live self-sufficient lives with water, earned income, good nutrition and education is becoming a reality. Slowly but surely, the people of Muntigunung are learning to fish for sustainable futures.

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You can support this wonderful program by purchasing cashews and Rosella tea, marmalade and flowers in syrup from Bali Buddha is Ubud and Kerobokan. For larger orders (10 kilos of cashewnuts/or 1 kilo of Rosella tea) please contact U.B. Muntigunung through danielelber@hotmail.com. To book a trek to Muntigunung, please call 0813 3796 6240.

For more information on the Futures for Children Foundation / Yayasan Masa Depan Untuk Anak Anak, please visit www. Zukunft-fuer-Kinder.ch.

'Dragons in the Bath', a collection of Ibu Kat's stories, is now available in paperback from

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