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QUESTIONS. IDEAS. INNOVATION. INSPIRATION. **ISSUE 01** SUMMER 2009



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Action stations!
Find out what we're up to this summer on our new supporters' page.

Slumdog Millionaire...

when the spotlight moves on.



DRC

Exclusive Congo's war on women.

ActionAid talks to the silent survivors of the war that has killed 3 million people.

Plus... The Big Issue: how is the credit crunch hitting the world's poorest?

NO LUXURY HOLIDAY CAN COMPARE TO THIS...

PHOTOS: BRIAN SOKOL/ACTIONAID



In November 2008 22 ActionAid volunteers arrived in a tiny village in Nepal. They set up camp, picked up tools and set to work with local people building new houses. This is a First Hand Experience, and, as Claire Boobbyer explains, it's more than just a holiday.

ActionAid volunteers during their First Hand Experience, Belarapur village, Nepal.



Volunteer Emma Colgan with new friends.

As the sun goes down on a hillside in remote western Nepal, bright red ActionAid t-shirts mingle with the vibrant violets and golds of local women's saris. People are laughing and sharing food. Not far away, volunteer Andy plays football with local boys half his height and age. They unceremoniously beat him.

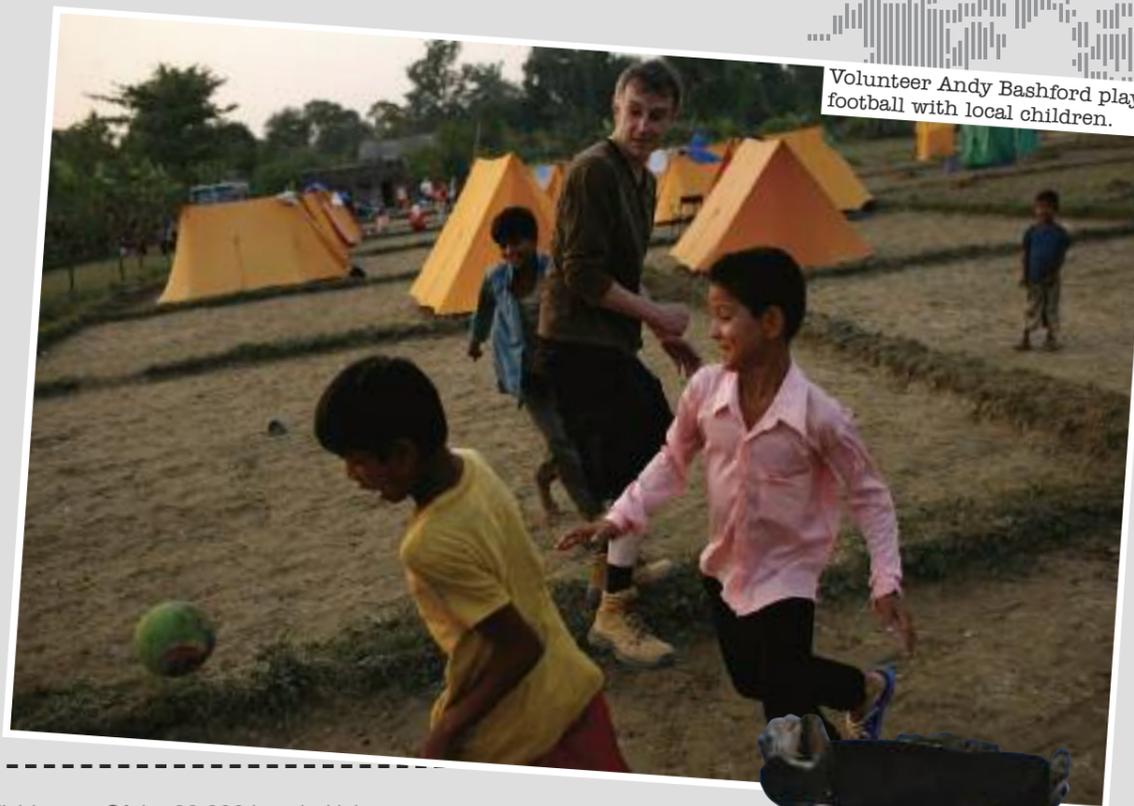
It's beautiful here. But the majestic landscape hides a largely unreported story of former slave labourers struggling to rebuild their lives. For centuries the mainly *tharu* ethnic minority toiled as *kamaiya* (bonded labourers), locked into paying off debts that passed from generation to generation. In 2000 the government finally outlawed the practice and declared the people free.

Des Ram Tharu, 45, wife Sita Devi Chaudhary, 40, and their six children are former *kamaiya*. "We would have to get up at 2am to start work in the fields and finish at 10pm," recalls Des Ram Tharu. "In one year we would receive 1,200kgs of rice to eat for the whole family. It would run out after three to four months. We then had to take out a loan from the landlord to pay for food for our children so our loan got bigger and we could not leave. We were permanently indebted to the landlord."

Of the 39,000 bonded labourers released from slavery in 2000, only 30,000 are officially recognised by the government. Some were lucky enough to be granted a small area of land, but many are still waiting to receive it. Even those granted land often end up in unhygienic, temporary shelters, unable to afford to build proper houses.

So last November, myself and 21 other ActionAid volunteers travelled to Belapur village to help ActionAid and the *kamaiya* people build new homes. Lucy Lukins from Cambridge was one. "I wanted to do this because my parents and I sponsored a child with ActionAid and I wanted to do a bit more," she says. "I wanted to do more than just a trek; I wanted to do something in the community."

Sitting round the dinner table on the first night, ActionAid Nepal's Rajesh Hamal explains that each new home costs £797. "In Belapur the government awarded families just 35 cubic feet of wood, 10,000 rupees (£87) and one fifth of an acre of land to rebuild their lives," he says. "This is not enough, so ActionAid is helping build low-cost, sustainable housing. Since 2002, we have built 588 houses and hope to build 500 more over the next two years." And it won't stop there – long term, ActionAid aims to provide proper housing for at least 15,000 former *kamaiya* families.



Volunteer Andy Bashford plays football with local children.



Kezzie Zukas carries a tray of hand-mixed cement.



Lucy Lukins in the house she's helping to build.

Laying the foundations

Over the week, under the watchful eye of group leader Trevor and project manager Anthony, our volunteer builders set to work on the foundations. With enthusiasm, humour and hard graft we mix cement, carry water, sift sand and run monumental brick relays. It's hard work under the beating sun, but the energy of local masons and families spurs us on.

During breaks we play games with village children and teach them songs. We also visit a local school – the children are delighted to learn a little English. At night, the children crowd round the campsite watching us take our evening showers at the pump.

Everybody in our group – aged 22 to 69 – got on, with the campsite experience bringing everyone together. "It's been great fun," says Anne Heron, a driving examiner from Ross-on-Wye. "I feel that I have contributed to the community. The work has been hard, but we are working side by side with the villagers and I'm finding it easy to bond with them."

All the volunteers spent months raising money for the trip. Becci Hall raised funds through car boot sales, a clothes sale, a weight-loss programme and a quiz night. Salvo Xerri, a GP from Crawley, raised £2,800 by shaving off the moustache he'd had since 1967 – before he even met his wife!

All our hard work paid off. "This has been an absolutely great experience," says Salvo. "I would definitely recommend the challenge. There are a lot of people in the world less fortunate than I am and, although it's hard work and we've been living in a tent for the week, it's so satisfying."

Des Ram Tharu, his wife and children will be living in one of the new houses. "These brick houses are our dream," he says. "Life before was very sad for us. We had not thought we would get a brick house with two rooms. It's a dream come true and we are very happy."

NEED TO KNOW

- you need to raise £3,200
- you don't need any building experience
- you can be aged 18-80
- come by yourself or with a friend

Action: be part of the next group of volunteers to take on this experience. Join our team travelling to Nepal in November 2009 or 2010. Other dates and destinations also available. 01460 23 8047 or experiences@actionaid.org for your free information pack.

See the fun for yourself – watch our Nepal films at www.actionaid.org.uk/experiences