

## 1. Implementing people and organisation:

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**Natasha Yolland:** Natasha Yolland spent most of her childhood growing up in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales. She first went to Bangladesh with an Ausaid program called the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development as an Occupational Therapy Lecturer. After completing this 12 months assignment, Natasha moved to Nepal where she has since worked in numerous disability NGOs, setting up an occupational therapy department, leading project evaluations and running workshops.

**Adrian Sym:** Adrian Sym has extensive experience working in the NGO sector in Bangladesh. Prior to developing this project he spent 4 years working in management and fundraising in one of the largest disability NGOs in Bangladesh. His interest in safe custody started when he read about a disabled girl who was gang raped and sent to jail because she was unable to tell the police the location of her family. Adrian and the organisation he was working for managed to have three disabled children released from jail to the care of the organisation, two of whom have subsequently been successfully rehabilitated in suitable safe environments in the community.

**Shishu Polli Plus:** Shishu Polli Plus is a well respected organisation in Sreepur, Bangladesh. It was originally started as an orphanage, but has now also a strong commitment to destitute mothers. There are currently around 580 children and 100 mothers living in this village. This is a safe village for women and children to receive basic health, education and vocational training that will enable them to be successfully reintegrated into the community.

## 2. Background and summary of needs to be addressed

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Like most countries, Bangladesh has many children who find themselves in vulnerable positions and in need of security. Some of these children are alleged to have committed an offence or are awaiting trial having already been charged. However, a vast number of children who are victims of circumstance are placed in what is commonly referred to as 'safe custody' for their own protection. The reasons for this are many and varied - many children have been rescued from trafficking; others have witnessed a crime and are held on informal witness protection grounds; some may be picked up from the street prior to the arrival of dignitaries or the staging of hartals (general strike) while more children may simply be unable to tell the authorities where their homes are. In short, the reasons for children being held in safe custody are as many as the children being held. What they have in common is that they have committed no offence and are confined in conditions which are unacceptable for minors without access to nationally and internationally recognised rights for children.

Recent years have seen some improvements in the facilities available for children in safe custody. However, conditions in police stations, jails or designated facilities are still the cause of great concern. Incidents of sexual, physical and emotion abuse are unacceptably high, often causing devastating long term effects on the child. Safe custody houses run by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs now exist in each Division of Bangladesh. Although not specified as such, these centres cater almost exclusively for women and girls. There are six 'vagrant homes' in the country run by the Department of Social Services in addition to the three Child Development

Centres run by the same Department. Within these institutions children have very limited access to legal aid and efforts to relocate the children are usually inadequate. Health and sanitary conditions fall below acceptable standards and the lack of education and training serve to deprive children of the opportunity of a prosperous future.

The needs which this project will address are:

**Basic security:** through the improvement of the environment within existing institutions, enabling children's development to be fostered free from the fear of maltreatment, physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

**Educational opportunities:** through improved access to schooling and vocational training

**Access to health service provision:** through the addressing of any health deficits children may have acquired in confinement such as through abuse or malnutrition

**Opportunities for sustainable livelihoods:** through reintegration of children into safe and suitable settings

**Increased public awareness:** through the dissemination of information in various forms of media

**Legislative change:** through collective action and collaboration with government departments, NGOs and relevant stakeholders.

### 3. Overall goal

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The project's overall goal is that sufficient legislative and infrastructural reform is achieved to ensure that vulnerable children in Bangladesh are not placed in safe or protective custody and their needs are met in ways and conditions which are consistent with international minimum standards.

### 4. Design of the project

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The project is going to be tackled in two stages. Shishu Poli Plus (SPP) has been instrumental in providing Natasha and Adrian with an umbrella to work under during the initial stages before another, NGO will be established with its primary focus at addressing the issues of safe custody for children. Due to the current political situation (coming up for national elections) and the process for registering for an NGO this gesture from SPP has been essential in providing the opportunity for starting stage one in the beginning of next year. Due to their registration with the government NGO bureau, SPP is not able to undertake stage two in their current remit.

### 5. Project objectives

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#### Stage One

Stage One is seen to be instrumental in changing policies and attitudes with the government and general public.

- To unify and co-ordinate the activities of all organisations and individuals on the issue of safe custody
- To publicise issues relating to safe custody
- To develop concise proposals for alternative ways of meeting the needs of vulnerable children

- To lobby for legislative changes to ensure that appropriate alternatives to safe custody are established
- To develop a pilot project looking at developing a rehabilitation model that will assist with the positive reintegration of children back into the community after they have been either picked up by the authorities or been placed within government institutions under 'safe custody'.

### **Stage Two**

This will be done along with the continuation of Stage One. Stage Two is essential in addressing the current needs of the children who are suffering today.

- Develop a model facility for children who have been picked up by the police or have been placed within government institutions for safe custody.
- This facility will address the immediate physical and psychosocial needs of the children.
- Have a strong focus on locating suitable, safe environments for the children to be returned to the community.
- Providing a model programme for rehabilitating the children back into the community.
- Providing educational/vocational opportunities for the children to attend at the facility or in the community, to give them the skills to be financially independent as they become adults.

## **6. Project activities**

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### **Stage One**

The establishment of a coalition is essential to ensure that focus is maintained on the issue of safe custody by all interested and active parties. Many organisations have activities relating to safe custody included in a variety of programmes. For example, legal aid may be given to children in safe custody by an NGO which also addresses the legal needs of other vulnerable groups. By establishing a dedicated service to address the needs of children in safe custody the focus and resources will not be diluted by other pressing needs. The coalition will organise workshops and meetings with various stakeholders, undertake research, produce publications and co-ordinate efforts at lobbying for relevant legislative changes.

The coalition will unify efforts and co-ordinate the mobilisation and distribution of resources in a variety of areas including:

- Ensuring that minimum standards are met in existing establishments
- Developing best practise guidelines on a graded reintegration approach
- Ensuring children have access to legal aid
- Tracing of families of lost children
- Sourcing appropriate settings in which children can be accommodated
- Provision of necessary services like health care and education
- Addressing psycho-social issues and community understanding necessary for a successful resettlement to take place

An additional component of the coalition will be to ensure that the issues concerning children in confinement are publicised in the media. Increased public awareness will be a vital factor in pushing for the required institutional reform which will result in children not longer being placed in inhumane conditions for their own 'protection'.

Most of these children are already victims but are accommodated in environments in which they are denied access to their basic rights. In a democratic society,

governments are obliged to respond to the demands of the public. By increasing levels of understanding and knowledge of both safe custody and appropriate alternatives thereof, systemic changes can be demanded of the authorities.

### **Stage Two**

Right now there are 100s of children who are detained under this barbaric system of safe or protective custody. The exact number is unknown, but estimates have been reported to be over 1,000 children. Addressing the issues at a government and social awareness level is essential to the long term change of attitudes and this system. Providing a service that will help support and protect those children who are suffering under this system right now has also been seen as an urgent requirement in Bangladesh.

Land has already been offered outside of Dhaka in a semi rural setting. This will assist with the project to develop a facility that is dedicated to those children who may have ended up detained in institutions because the government had nowhere else to send them.

This facility will:

- Be seen as a stepping stone between the authorities and the community
- Develop infrastructures where children can be delivered directly to this service, or other appropriate services straight from the police station to avoid being detained for long periods.
- It will provide a model of practice that will adhere to minimal standards that other institutions can learn from
- It will look at the psychosocial and physical needs of each child as an individual and provide the opportunity for appropriate intervention to address any problems or deficits identified (acknowledging that most of these children would have had some traumatic circumstance to bring them to this situation).
- It will provide resources and partnerships to help with locating and identifying appropriate setting for children to be returned to the community (it is acknowledged that some children have found themselves in safe custody due to the unsafe environment of their homes).
- It will provide a safe and supportive environment that will address health, education and vocational training requirements of the individual child.
- Develop and undertake an appropriate rehabilitation model that will support the child and the community during the phase of reintegrating the child. This would be undertaken by working in collaboration with everybody involved, for example, the children, their family members or appropriate services, prominent community members and local schools or vocational training centres.

## **7. Project outcomes**

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The main outcomes of the project will be:

1. Effective unification and co-ordination of activities and resources and the identification of common goals to address the issue of safe custody
2. Production and dissemination of appropriate and achievable proposals for addressing safe custody issues
3. Effective monitoring of conditions in existing establishments
4. Improved fact-finding on safe custody issues and dissemination of the results
5. Increased public awareness and understanding of issues relating to safe custody
6. Production of paper- and web-based publications on safe custody issues

7. Improved effectiveness of collaboration with government agencies and lobbying for legislative changes
8. Develop a model facility for children who are in the predicament of safe or protective custody that addresses the needs of the child and adheres to best practice.
9. The development of a suitable model that addresses the child's and communities needs for successful rehabilitation for the child back into the community.
10. With these above models, government institutions will have a better framework to work towards when providing services for children in these situations.

## **8. Project partners**

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The advantage of building an effective coalition will be the ability to combine and share all relevant knowledge, expertise, facilities and implementing capacities to meet the needs of the targeted children. Some of the main partners of the project will be:

- Relevant government ministries and departments, including the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs, the Department of Social Services and the Ministry of Law;
- Police and law enforcement agencies; and
- Non-government organisations including Save the Children-UK, Ain O Shalish Kendra, Odhikar, Concern, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association and the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP)

## **9. Project duration and sustainability**

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The proposed project will be finite in nature, as the coalition building, networking and lobbying will aim to ensure that children in Bangladesh will, in the future, be located in appropriate settings under acceptable conditions. However, it is recognised that this is a long-term goal and that it will be several years before governmental and law enforcement capacity is sufficient to make the coalition's work redundant.

Operational sustainability will depend to a large extent on the project's ability to work closely with its partner organisations and share skills, knowledge and experience. It is anticipated that the project will have multiplier effects in terms of encouraging others to embark on relevant initiatives, especially with regard to demanding more concentrated government action on the issue of safe custody.

## **10. Operational capacity**

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Shishu Polli Plus has 17 years experience in operating internationally renowned services for vulnerable children and mothers. The proposed project will be initially managed under the guidance of one health professional from Australia who has considerable experience of various NGOs in South Asia, including one year's working experience in Bangladesh, and an administrator from UK with four years working experience in a Bangladeshi NGO and a long-standing association with safe custody issues.