

FOUNDER'S CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2021



This year we have been celebrating an astonishing twenty years. Twenty years of helping children, because of one small boy, whose lonely exhausting walk for water across the unforgiving deserts of Darfur, seemed to me in 2001 to be totally unacceptable. It was, and is, unacceptable, because something can be done about it. There is water under Darfur. Why was no one drilling for it, so that no one should go thirsty? And 20 years on, very little has changed. Children are still struggling for hours across the desert with heavy jerry cans. A jerry can full of water weighs 25 kilos.

Since that chance encounter in Darfur, Kids for Kids has introduced our whole range of grassroots projects to an amazing 105 villages – more than half a million people benefitting from what you are helping us to provide, by supporting Kids for Kids tonight. I have not heard of one person leaving any of our villages to become a refugee, seeking help somewhere across the world. Our earlier villages are now two or three times bigger. I get embarrassed because what we provide seems so very simple, think what you and I would consider essential. In Darfur, the loan of five goats, a basic handpump, mosquito nets, blankets, farm tools and so on – those are their essentials. A family's only chance of survival is if the grains they have planted grow, but this year there has been drought, then floods, and, in some places, camels trampled it into the ground. The difference that our unique package of projects makes to a young family, is dramatic. They are life changing. We are showing that training communities to work together, to support each other, so that the projects are successful, helps everyone, not just the poorest families to whom we provide direct assistance.

Can you imagine the impact a properly trained midwife has, in a village where there has been no health care. I still cannot bear to think of rope delivery. Yes – when there is obstructed labour then that is what has to happen. The only way a baby can be born – rope delivery. The mother is lucky to survive such brute force, the baby is unlikely to live. OUR midwives deliver healthy babies, and ensure mothers with complications get to hospital. If we only provided village midwives we would be saving countless lives. But of course, we do much more.

Recently I was invited to speak to the smallest children at Cheam School in Newbury. I had to get up and head out in the dark and freezing cold, to get to them in time for their Assembly at 8.30. On the way, I was saying to myself I must not agree to do this sort of thing in future. But it was a privilege to show those little ones how children their own age live, right now in a very different land so far away.

Yet is it so different? Mothers there have the same aspirations for their children as mothers here. But in Darfur children sleep directly on the sand, in huts made of straw, no bed, no bed clothes. They are bitten by sand flies which make them sick, and by mosquitoes which carry not just malaria, but dengue fever, chickungunya, yellow fever – all incurable. Everything is in short supply, even bread. And their mothers cannot afford to send them to school. And those little children in Newbury understood how important it is to help.

There IS no other organisation dedicated to helping the forgotten villages of Darfur. You will know that there has been a military coup in Sudan. In an effort to win over the international community, and its own people, the Prime Minister has been reinstated, but it does not give me confidence with so many uncertainties. What I can assure you of however, is that we will do all we can, to continue to help families in desperate need, as we have done throughout all the years under the previous regime. We work directly

with the communities – this is what makes all the difference. Everything we fund is designed to be sustainable. Real sustainability.

When we build a kindergarten, we ensure there is a committed PTA to take it over. Our village midwives are funded in partnership with the state Ministry of Health, so that the Ministry will support them after their training. And most important of all, we train the communities to run our Goat Loans, so that in time, the whole village benefits from our initial provision of goats. Indeed, so successful are our goat loans in the impact they have on the health of the children, and the livelihoods they give to the poorest women, that our Goat Loan has been called The Best Micro Finance Scheme ever.

This year however, conditions in Darfur have been the worst I have ever known. Floods, drought, soaring inflation, and yes, violence, all have taken their toll. And Covid. Mothers cannot afford soap as you know – that is why we are still raising funds to be able to give five bars of soap to each family in all our villages. With no income, poverty is unimaginable.

And I was shocked at the poverty of the landscape when we first went to Darfur. Darfur is the size of France so as in France the vegetation differs from region to region. I saw baobabs in South Darfur. So why not in North Darfur? In 2007 we planted our first Baobabs. They grew. We renovated the tree nursery in El Fasher and planted a demonstration garden to educate the villagers on the benefits of trees. Since then we have been planting 14 different varieties of drought resistant trees. All have bi-products that will add to people's livelihoods. It is hard labour to water the trees, but after the first two years the tap roots will have reached the water table, and they will survive. In one village they have been harvesting Gum Arabic now for over six years. One of our first baobabs is called the Love Tree of Darfur as people carve their initials and hearts in it. And I am planning a Moringa Plantation because there is research that is showing that moringa seeds purify water. Clean water at last in Darfur.

You will know that trees are essential if we are to stop global warming. Darfur is at the forefront, with the Sahara creeping south inexorably. We have planted over 53,000 trees, so far. Many of course have died in the searing heat, but the success of our tree project was brought home to me when a man told me last February that rabbits and foxes had been seen in their community forest. They had not seen any for decades. And I myself saw a pair of hornbills. I had never dreamt that, because of Kids for Kids, animals and birds would return.

Do you see why Kids for Kids has to plan for the next twenty years? I have been determined from the start, never to let anyone down in the villages of Darfur. To promise help to the poorest of the poor, and then to fail, would be unforgivable. If you would consider becoming a Children's Champion, choosing projects to support for three years, you would make my job so much easier.

It is now time for perhaps the hardest part of the year for me. Time to choose which villages we will adopt next year. The joy of the village leaders is beyond words when their village is chosen. You see the leaders are not appointed because it is hereditary. They are chosen because of their wisdom and philanthropy. But then there are the villages that we cannot adopt, that I have to turn down. That upsets me beyond words. One year I was in Darfur with Alastair, and we held a workshop. A leader stood up and told us that he had walked for two days to get to the meeting, because he wanted to thank me for adopting his village the previous year. He said he had applied to Kids for Kids for five years before I had selected his village. In every one of those five years, children had died from preventable illnesses. He said not one child had died since Kids for Kids had started to help his people.

Twenty years of Kids for Kids. Twenty years of doing all we can to help children no one else is helping. It

would be tragic if we stopped now, now when so many children are facing such appalling conditions. We MUST continue, we MUST do all we can, and yes, we MUST go on for another twenty years. We are needed. The little 9 year old, who first inspired me, Ibrahim, is now 29. He told me last February, that his son is at our Kindergarten. He is not walking long hours for water. He is at school. He is healthy. He is happy. He will not become a refugee. To Ibrahim, and to me, it was a miracle our meeting in the desert 20 years ago. Let's make more miracles happen.

Children need goats, so they have milk to drink. The land needs trees to grow green again. Those are what I hope Father Christmas will give me this year!

Happy Christmas everyone!



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