

Nourishing mothers, nurturing futures

Expectant mothers struggling with malnutrition in Bangladesh received a welcome surprise this year, when Australian Rotarians collaborated with a local non-profit to deliver much needed food parcels to help nourish both mothers and their babies.

WORDS SARAH ATKINS
PRESIDENT, NO BORDERS ROTARACT

ADURI is 23 years old and already has two children. Having been married to a stonemason at 16, she is pregnant with a third, but her husband can't find year-round work in the isolated village of Vaturia, Bangladesh. As a result, they and their small family live in perpetual food uncertainty. In nearby Mobarakkati, Rebekah and her husband deal with similar financial insecurity after the loss of her father in a road accident. Rebekah is also pregnant. Despite working as a tailor, and her husband as a tradesman, hunger and malnutrition are constant companions.

Bangladesh is no stranger to high infant mortality rates as a result of malnutrition. In 1960, it was estimated that as high as one-tenth of infants did not survive birth. Even as recently as 1990, under-five mortality rates were registered as 146 per 1,000. Today, the numbers are much better, largely due to

programs that target nutritional deficits and disease prevention in infants across the country. But these programs often struggle with funding and external aid.

Zahangir Alam, the Executive Director of Smile Baby Welfare Society and a member of the Rotary Club of Dhaka New City, appealed to the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central, Vic, for assistance. A small club with a penchant for finding meaningful overseas aid opportunities, project lead Stephen Mather and PDG Brian Martin immediately stepped in.

The ensuing initiative, Balanced Food Support Scheme for Expectant Mothers, is an ongoing collaboration between the Smile Baby Bangladesh non-profit and the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central, further assisted and funded by the Rotary clubs of Dhaka New City and Jashore as well as a district grant. The program's volunteers purchase large quantities



ABOVE: MR PROSENJIT ROY, HEALTH CARE PROVIDER OF SIRAJINGA COMMUNITY CLINIC, SPEAKS ABOUT THE BALANCED FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM.

INSET: REBEKAH KHATUN, 27, IS ONE OF THE PROUD BENEFICIARIES OF THE BALANCED FOOD SCHEME FOR EXPECTANT MOTHERS PROJECT.

of shelf-stable food from local sources that are rich in nutrition and cost effective, put together food kits and organise distribution. Each expectant mother is given a complete kit twice over the course of her pregnancy. When picking up the parcel, the beneficiary and their family members are also given crucial opportunities to receive education and advice on neonatal care and personal health, strengthening community awareness and bonding.

"[This] awareness among expectant mothers has reduced the risk of malnutrition, jaundice, pneumonia and other disabilities," said Stephen. "The Bangladesh Government is also showing an interest, providing health services to the expectant mothers and folic acid and other supplements."

Stephen emphasises the importance of word of mouth in getting more women to take advantage of

the maternal health learning opportunities.

"The education being provided on nutrition and hygiene will be incredibly important long term in increasing awareness on these matters in rural communities."

The success and reach of the program has already exceeded expectations by almost double. Hosnara, a third recipient of the food parcels, was especially relieved for the nutritional support as she and her husband must provide for six family members, including a disabled son.

"Due to lack of money, my family cannot afford good food," she says. "After Mother Horlicks [nutritional supplement], eggs, almonds and dates, and so on, I felt physically healthy and was able to give birth to a healthy baby girl. For this I am grateful to Rotary. I sincerely thank them." **RDP**