**Tuesday – July 28th 2009**

I reached Ahmedabad at 6am and was received by Meera (director of Center for Development) and Rafi (her husband) at the train station. I stayed at their place during this visit. Reema, Neha and myself left for Piplaj at around 11am. Reema is Meera’s neice who volunteers with CfD and Neha works with CfD helping out with teacher’s training, organizational work, etc. Neha has obtained her MSW and Reema just finished her undergraduate.

One of the first things I noticed when I reached Piplaj is that it looked dirtier than the last time I had visited. There was water logging everywhere and infestation of flies and mosquitoes. During my previous visit I had observed this water logging on the outskirts of the settlement. This time, it was in the settlement. When I inquired about this, they told me that this happens every monsoon. In fact it is less now since it has not rained in a few days. When it rains, the water level rises and teachers have a tough time wading through it so, it much harder for the children to get to the classrooms. The children fall in the water and then sit through the class in soaking wet clothes.

I was received by the coordinator, Savitaben, who oversees the education centers. There are five education centers in operation now. They have been divided as follows – balwadi, 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd 4th and 5th grade combined, 6th and 7th grade combined. Getting into all the classrooms was a challenge since there was water logging outside all the classrooms. I spent about 15-20 mins in each classroom. The children now have an organized timetable. They have been given books, slates, stationary, folders (made by the women there) and clip boards. Children leave their books in the classroom at the end of school day. Teaching is mainly in Gujarati. They are taught the English alphabet as well.

I was given an impromptu performance by the children of 3rd 4th and 5th grade. They sang a few songs for me which were very entertaining. The children of Balwadi had prepared some songs to sing for me. I was told by the teachers and parents alike that introduction of the Balwadi had been a considerable help in the education of older kids. Before the balwadi, the older kids would either stay at home or bring the younger ones to class with them which completely disrupted their learning.

A library has been set up with books and chairs where children can come after school and spend time. School runs from 11am to 3pm, after which the children (especially girls) spend time at the library. The teachers stay till 5.30pm watching over the children and addressing other issues of the colony like filing applications for electricity, sewage, spraying of pesticides for mosquito control, water, bathrooms, etc. After school the teachers work towards trying to improve living conditions within the settlement.

The introduction of the library has put parents at ease. There were several cases of sexual molestation and rape in the settlement. Since all girls can come spend time in the library till the parents return, it has reduced the incidence considerably.

There was no electricity in most of the classrooms. They have applied for meters but haven’t gotten them yet. They try to make illegal connections into the classroom from other meters but the electricity company keeps cutting it off. Currently only 40% of the settlement has procured meters. Once the education center obtains electricity, the landlords ask them to vacate, since the room is well-equipped now and can be lived in. The rooftops are metal sheets which heat up considerably. As a result, the rooms without electricity and fans were like an oven. I could barely spend 10 minutes in there, and I was drenched in sweat and short of breath. Most children wanted to sit near the door so that they could get some air.

I was told that winter is the only season when they can teach without any hindrances. It is too hot in the rooms during summers and there is water-logging in monsoons. The need for a proper infrastructure for the school is being strongly felt.

I had taken Hershey’s Kisses for the kids which were given to them right away. They really enjoyed this rare treat but I had to insist that they throw the wrappers in the dustbins and not where they were sitting. I reiterated this thought to the teachers as well, that the kids need to be taught principles of basic hygiene so that they can live in clean surroundings. Each classroom was equipped with a dustbin and a water matka.

At around 1pm the children had a break where they were given bananas as snacks. The younger kids were given 2 bananas each and the older kids were given 3 bananas each. They would be given oranges later. The snacks provided were chosen such that during a given week the kids would get to eat something from all nutrition groups. The snacks are prepared in the office (if cooking is required) and taken to Piplaj. In Piplaj, a food committee has been appointed consisting of local women. They taste the food before it is given to the children to ensure that the quality is good and the food is edible. Any complaint about the food is reported by the food committee so that it can be rectified immediately. In a given week, the children get fruits, ParleG biscuits, daal bhaat, pulses, and vegetables.

Other changes to the area include the following

1. Two pukka road have been constructed with light poles that go into the colony. The roads are outside the settlement. The lanes in the settlement are yet to be made.
2. The colony has expanded considerably with new introductions to the area
3. A factory is being constructed at the deep end of the colony. People don’t know for sure what will be made there.
4. Rabid dogs were roaming everywhere

**Wednesday, July 29th 2009**

 I went to Piplaj in the morning with Reema and spent a couple of hours there. I spent some time in the classrooms. Kids of the 6th and 7th grade did a song and dance performance for me today. After visiting the classrooms and meeting all the kids, I spent some time meeting with the parents. There is a Parents Committee as well, that monitors children’s academic progress. Most parents are illiterate, but being a part of the committee gets them actively involved in the education process. I met about 7-8 mothers of which two of them were a part of the committee and the others sent their children to the school. Parents realized the importance of education and stated that we cannot do much because we have not studied so we will try our best to provide it to our children so that they can lead better lives.

All the parents were very happy with the school and talked about the progress of their kids. They were especially happy about the Balwadi being set up, since this freed up the older kids. Also, parents liked to send their kids to the Balwadi since it freed them up in the day time allowing them to attend to household chores.

Another factor that the parents were extremely pleased with were the afternoon snacks. Most agreed that providing the snacks was an incentive for kids to come to school. In fact kids insisted on going to school because they said they got better food in school than at home.

They also talked about how establishing the library has made them worry-free about their girls. Most iterated that there were instances in the settlement which made them apprehensive about leaving their girls alone, but they feel safe knowing that the girls are in the library.

Additionally, Kadam has been helping kids get their birth certificates. Most children don’t have birth certificates. So, even if they take the government recognized exam and are eligible to go to school, they cannot procure admissions since they do not have birth certificates. All parents have now realized the importance of getting and saving birth certificates. Some parents who had the required documents have been successful in getting certificates made. Others who have no prof of birth are still struggling to get this document. We talked about how they should be ambassadors in the settlement and educate new mothers about getting all the documentation in order. Most of them said that they are already engaged in this activity.

One of my concerns was about the kids who are currently in grade 7th. Since, Kadam does not provide anything after grade 7th, what will happen to these kids next year? I posed this question to the mothers there. I asked them if they would be willing to send their children to a school outside the settlement after grade 7th. Dishearteningly, most replied in the negative. They said if there is a school within the settlement, they will willingly send their kids to school, but they will not send them outside. They listed the following factors for this reluctance

1. They do not have the financial means to provide for the child’s transportation need to and from the school
2. They are worried about the safety of their children, especially of the girl child.

**Thursday, July 30th 2009**

I spent the afternoon meeting with the teachers today. There are five teachers and one coordinator.

Coordinator – Savita Ben

Balwadi – Neeta Ben

1st grade – Saira banu ben

2nd grade- Gita ben

3rs, 4th and 5th grade – Rajani

6th and 7th grade – Trupti ben

All teachers except Neeta ben and Saira Banu ben are college graduates.

All teachers except Rajni have to travel upwards of an hour to reach the school. Rajni lives in Piplaj.

Initially, the teachers were shy to talk and open up. Gradually, we started discussing about the school. All of them said that the biggest problem that they faced was the infrastructure and strongly felt the need for a proper school.

Teachers also told me that there are some kids and parents who motivated to send the kids to school and they show up regularly. But every morning all teachers have to visit the houses and collect all the kids and bring them to school.

They told me that recently they had attended a training session and were going to implement those teaching techniques in school. The training focused on the Digantar and Montessori style of teaching – of making kids learn and understand by drawing parallels from their day to day lives.

Meera insisted that I tell them about Asha for Education. I gave them an overview of the history and structure of Asha and a detailed account of Asha – Cleveland. I described to them all the projects that we are supporting and how we raise funds to support these projects. I talked about how Asha is a 100% volunteer – based organization with every volunteer having a day-time job and working in the afterhours for Asha.

After, this discussion the teachers expressed and appreciated that the work we did to support the projects was not easy. Meera had insisted that I give an account of this to the teachers so that they realize how the money is obtained to support the school and appreciate the value of each rupee coming into the school. She wanted them to realize and understand that the money was made available through a lot of hard work and labor of all the volunteers.

After this we spent some time playing games like charades and Antakshri. Towards the end all teachers started insisting that I visit their homes. Since, this would not be possible for me; we agreed to meet for lunch at the school on Monday where I could share everyone’s meals. Unfortunately, I was sick on Monday and could not visit the school.

Following this, the first Swine Flu death was reported in the country and there were a couple of cases detected in the settlement, so I could not revisit the site.

**Discussions with Meera**

Following the site visit and learning about the area and its needs I spent time discussing them with Meera and what could be the potential solutions.

Infrastructure: The biggest need of the hour seems to be a proper infrastructure for the school. The budget to build a school is Rs.12 lakhs. They have identified a plot of four houses that the owners are willing to sell. She is trying to procure funds by contacting other funding agencies. She is also trying to procure funds by talking to donors who are donating old newspapers to the pasti project. The aim is to start building by the start of next year and have the school ready by summer 2010.

Another agency called “Child Reach” has approved funding for 4 more educational centers in the area. Kadam has requested them to currently differ that funding till the school is built.

After 7th grade: I also discussed my concerns about older kids whose parents are unwilling to send them to schools outside the area. Her solution to that is the introduction of a ‘bridge course.’ This will be started once the school infrastructure is ready. This will be akin to a night school, where students will not only be taught material from grades 8th to 10th but also vocational skills that can make them self sufficient.

Vocational training: Since many of these kids will not pursue higher studies, it becomes important to teach them other skills that can help them earn a livelihood. The introduction of the bridge course will provide vocational training to older kids. Currently, 360 women in the area have been trained for the following

1. Making file folders – they have a regular market in Bangalore now
2. Mobile phone repairing – Some women have obtained jobs in mobile shops after this training
3. Driving – There is a market for personal female drivers.
4. Soap making
5. Home caretaker
6. Office assistant

Funding for this training is provided by FVRTS (Functional Vocational Training and Research Center). They pay for materials and soft skills training. Depending upon how many women can obtain employment from the training they will introduce additional batches. The training is provided for 3 months, so there are 4 batches per year.

She has plans to introduce training for men as well in skills like plumbing, carpentry, electrician, etc. once the infrastructure is ready.

**Other Activities**

Pasti (old newspapers and other articles) Project: While I was visiting, there was an article published in the Times of India about the pasti project, and how the money obtained is used to provide education and other support to the underprivileged society. Following this, there were several people who called to donate their pasti to CfD. Meera was busy communicating with the new donors and collecting pasti. They try to have at least 20 donors in an area to make it a worthwhile trip to collect the items. Individuals who called would mobilize their neighbors and friends as well to donate. Dindayal University in Gandhinagar and the sikh community have also pledged their support. In the two weeks that I was there, they got 120 additional donors.

Nari Adalat: Following cases of domestic violence in the area, the Ekta Nari Sangathan was established to address these issues. They hold a Nari Adalat (Women’s court) every week where people can file their grievances. The following teams are in place to conduct the proceedings

* Fact finding team
* Police Complaint team
* Counseling Services – provided by Meera who has a degree in Psychology
* Lawyer – a professional lawyer provides her services

Once a complaint is lodged, the fact finding team goes out to assess the case and determine its validity. The abuser is contacted and is asked to appear in “court.” Generally, most cases get resolved by talking to the abuser and asking him to refrain from his violent activities. If the abuser doesn’t cooperate, a police complaint is filed against him and he might get arrested. Counseling is provided to the abused to help them deal with the situation. If the case goes to the police, the lawyer’s services are required.

Currently, this is a self-funded activity. The funding agency, Oxfam is very impressed with this activity and has decided to fund it.

**The use of the Right to Information (RTI) Act**

Eight RTI applications have been filed for the Piplaj.

1. **Medical Services:** There were no health services provided in the area. An RTI application was made regarding this and now there is a medical van that comes to the area every week.
2. **Bathroom facilities:** Bathroom facilities in the area are extremely inadequate. There are only 10 bathrooms for over 500 households. Bathrooms stop working frequently and are cleaned only once a week. Every time an application is made the appropriate repairs are done but they don’t last very long. The need is for more bathrooms in the area.
3. **Water faucets:** RTI application filed for getting water faucets for the area. They currently have two communal water areas equipped with about 8-10 faucets.
4. **Permanent Accommodation:** The Piplaj settlement was supposed to be a temporary two year accommodation till proper houses were built to accommodate the residents. Since it has been over two years since the first batch of residents arrived, an RTI application was filed to find out when they would receive permanent accommodation. The reply was 5-7 years. Following this response, the need for a better education center in the area was felt.
5. **Construction of road and street lights:** Following the RTI application, two pukka roads with street lights going into the settlement have been constructed
6. **School in the area –** An application was filed to determine if it was possible to get a school in the area. The law states that there should be a school within an 8 km radius. Since there is a school within this radius another school in the area will not be provided
7. **Aanganwadi (for little kids):** There was an Aanganwadi on paper operated by a different NGO in the area but no services were being provided. Following the RTI application, the Aanganwadi has been defuncted and the operating NGO blacklisted. Center for Development has now obtained rights to operate an aaganwadi in the area. The government will provide mid-day meals and a teacher for this. The pay provided to the teacher by the government is not substantial so CfD will supplement it. Once the government Aangawadi is established, Kadam will not have to run the Balwadi.
8. **Ration shop:** There is no ration shop in the area. Following an RTI application, CfD has obtained rights to start a ration shop in the area.