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Schools Rescue Children from Brick Bondage in Nepal

BHAKTAPUR, NEPAL: Five-year old Rupesh Shrestha (photo below) has never known a world without bricks. He has lived in a brick factory for most of his life and began to mold bricks from mud at the age of three in clear violation of Nepali law, which forbids dangerous work for children under 16.



Back to school: Rupesh Shrestha, aged 5

Rupesh grimaces when asked to describe conditions in the factory where he lives with his parents and 6-month old brother: "Smoky and dirty." But he also has lots of charm. Asked what he wants to be when he grows up, he grins and replies: "A father."

For now, Rupesh is attending school rather than flipping bricks, thanks to an innovative project that is funded by The Advocacy Project (AP) through [Global Giving](#) and managed by [CONCERN](#), a leading Nepali advocate for child rights. The project is paying for 25 children from brick families, including Rupesh, to attend school in Bhaktapur, near Kathmandu, and in Ramechhap, a district in the east that will send

thousands down to work in the Bhaktapur kilns in October. Meet the children [by clicking here](#).

The project is also supported by Bricks2books, a student-run initiative in the US led by 12-year old Grace McGuire. If this first phase succeeds, CONCERN and AP hope to fund more school placements and campaign to eliminate child labor completely from seven major kilns near Kathmandu. [Click here to donate to the AP appeal](#) for Nepal.

A recent mission by CONCERN and AP to Ramechhap and Bhaktapur underscored the dependency of both districts on the brick industry, and the extraordinary abuse involved.



Nir Bahadur, center, will work for years in the kilns to pay off his debts. But his children are in school, thanks to AP's Nepal appeal.

Ramechhap - an area of spectacular mountains and extreme poverty - began sending workers to the kilns of Bhaktapur 40 years ago. Today, the employers reinforce their hold over poor families in the district by hiring representatives, known as *Naike*, to entice workers with a large advance.

This, however, leads to a kind of debt bondage. One worker, Nir Bahadur (photo left), almost wept as he described running up bills of 500,000 rupees (\$4,633) through speculation - many times more than he will earn in the next season of working in the Bhaktapur kilns.

This was born out by Rupesh's mother Urmila Shrestha, 25, who explained how she often starts at midnight and works for up to 17 hours making and carrying bricks. Workers are paid by the brick, she said. Together with her husband she rarely makes more than 1,000 rupees a day (\$9).

Infants are drawn into child labor when parents like Urmila are forced to take their children with them to work, and five-year old Rupesh drew gasps from onlookers as he expertly went through the motions of flipping bricks. Urmila explained that Rupesh liked playing with mud as an infant, and that this was the only way for her to keep an eye on him.



What they face: Entire families work up to 17 hours a day over 5 months in the kilns to earn \$9 a day

Teachers at the Shree Dattatraya school in Bhaktapur, where Rupesh goes to school, have embraced the CONCERN program with enthusiasm, although they also worry that children who live in the kilns with their parents, like Rupesh, will be drawn into brick work after they return home from school. This, too, is a result of poverty. Only one of the ten families interviewed by AP in Bhaktapur can afford to live in rented accommodation, outside the kilns.

While putting children in school clearly helps, advocates also see it as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve

facilities in the factories, particularly day care, housing and medical services. The choking dust and biting cold can cause serious illness. In one factory, where 100 families share washing facilities and 5 toilets, Roji Tamang, 13, accompanies her younger sister to the toilet, for fear of sexual assault. Urmila Shrestha (photo below) described being given bricks and zinc sheeting to build a shelter which can come apart in high winds, causing serious injuries.

Bijaya Sainju, the founder and director of CONCERN, said that he has urged employers to install medical and day care facilities in their factories and that several are cooperating. But several have also complained that CONCERN is trying to cut off their flow of workers.

Mr Sainju replied that he is only urging employers to respect Nepali law and stop drawing villagers into debt. But he also agreed that the climate for advocacy has changed since the earthquake, in favor of the employers. Nepal has very few labor inspectors, and the enforcement of the law has been even more lax since the earthquakes caused extensive damage to many brick factories. Meanwhile the demand for bricks has soared and many more poor families are under pressure to seek work in the kilns.



Brick family: Rupesh, right, cares for his brother while his mother Urmila works, even though he now attends school.

CONCERN is part of a larger coalition, [Brick Clean Network](#), which is exploring ways to co-opt as well as pressure employers.

One idea is to stamp bricks from responsible factories as child labor-free and even promote their sale. Meanwhile, CONCERN has also tried to help the workers in Ramechhap to develop an alternative source of livelihood. Several families have supplemented their income by raising goats donated by CONCERN. But only one worker interviewed by AP, Surya Bahadur, had earned enough to turn his back on brick work altogether.



Careful with those pennies! Grace McGuire and friends have raised over \$750 for CONCERN.

With the education project successfully launched, CONCERN and AP hope to scale up the project and send up to 100 more young brick workers to school. In Washington, Grace McGuire is hoping to enroll more student volunteers to Bricks2books, which has raised more than \$750 for CONCERN. Grace and her friends (left) may also reach out to the students in Nepal through a pen pal exchange. Details will be posted on the AP and CONCERN websites.

- [Meet the 25 children](#) benefiting from the AP appeal.
- View [Joty Sohi's](#) photos of brick work and kids in Ramechhap and Bhaktapur
- View [Iain Guest's photos](#) on the July AP mission to Ramechhap and Bhaktapur.

Read past AP news bulletins about Nepal [here!](#)