Mention Bangladesh and one thing comes to mind for many Singaporeans: construction workers.

Yet we know little about the people whose manual labour has given us the homes we live in, malls we shop at and pavements we walk on. My impression, until a month ago, was not much better informed.

Then I had a chance to fly there for two weeks with 14 of my classmates. We were there for an overseas reporting course offered through the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University. The theme for the trip was how the economic recession has affected developing countries.

To say the experience was an eye-opener is an understatement. I had never before been in a country bustling with so much activity - and disorder.

I wrote two reports while I was there. One focused on the local jute industry, dubbed Bangladesh's 'golden crop' for the millions of dollars it earns for the country.

I interviewed jute workers, mill owners and middlemen, who buy the jute from the workers and sell them to the mills.

The workers, mostly villagers, are at the mercy of the middlemen, who pay them far less than the market rate in order to increase their profits. This made me sad and yet I could not do anything about it.

My other report focused on the dreams of 30 children I randomly polled in the streets.

Many children in Bangladesh have to work to supplement their family incomes even though they are only in primary school.

Some work as salesmen, others as tea-boys, buying drinks and snacks for customers.

Their dreams are big - many want to become doctors, pilots and cricket players. But while public education is free, their dreams will probably remain just that due to a lack of facilities, good teachers and the lack of opportunity within the education system.

This sad story is repeated millions of times across the country. In all, 33 million children - 56 per cent of Bangladesh's child population of 63 million - live below the International Poverty Line, defined as those whose disposable incomes fall at or under US$1 (S$1.40) per day.

Indeed, the struggle to survive is palpable in the air of Dhaka, the capital where we spent most of our time. Rickshaw riders laboured night and day ferrying passengers, beggars were everywhere in the streets and buildings were dilapidated.

It was ironic to see the people who toil to construct our beautiful buildings unable to do the same in their own country.

It was an emotionally exhausting time for me as I felt like helping them, but did not know where to start.

And yet they did not wallow in their misery. The people of Bangladesh are trusting and helpful, willing to go out of their way to give us directions, no matter how busy they were.

Now, when I see Bangladeshis here, I can imagine the struggles they have gone through to better their lives and those of their families.

I appreciate their being here to help us build up our country, and respect the hard work they put in.

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