THE Hope DISPATCH

Uplifting news, inspiring stories, and positive change from around the world.

EDITION 2 · AUGUST 2026



IN THIS EDITION

From Despair to 95-95-95

How Cambodia's Communities Turned the Tide on HIV

Building Their Own Future

The Kenyan Women Breaking Into Construction

Fifty Dollars at a Time

The Church Congregation Wiping Out Its Neighbours' Medical Debt

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Wings Over the Trent

White Storks Return to England's Midlands After 600 Years

Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Subscribe free on LinkedIn

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Contents

The Hope Dispatch: August 2026 3
From Despair to 95-95-95: How Cambodia's Communities Turned the Tide on HIV 4
Building Their Own Future: The Kenyan Women Breaking Into Construction 12
Fifty Dollars at a Time: The Church Congregation Wiping Out Its Neighbours' Medical Debt 19
When Bluey Spoke Yolŋu Matha: A Children's Cartoon and the Living Languages of Arnhem Land 26
Wings Over the Trent: White Storks Return to England's Midlands After 600 Years 33
Follow us on LinkedIn 40
About The Hope Dispatch 42

INTRODUCTION

The Hope Dispatch: August 2026

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition 2 of The Hope Dispatch: 5 pieces for August 2026.

Uplifting news, inspiring stories, and positive change from around the world.

This edition brings together 5 new features written for this edition. New features are marked "Written for this edition".

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- From Despair to 95-95-95: How Cambodia's Communities Turned the Tide on HIV
- Building Their Own Future: The Kenyan Women Breaking Into Construction
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Thank you to every reader who subscribes, shares and responds.

Warm regards,
Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu
Author, The Hope Dispatch

THE HOPE DISPATCH

From Despair to 95-95-95: How Cambodia's Communities Turned the Tide on HIV

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In June 2026 Cambodia became the first country in Asia and the Pacific to reach the global 95-95-95 targets for HIV. A nation that once lost thousands of people a year to AIDS is now a model for the world, and the people who made it happen were, more often than not, the people the epidemic hit hardest.

A milestone with a long shadow

Some good news arrives with a press release and a photograph. Other good news arrives carrying thirty years of grief behind it. The announcement that came out of Phnom Penh in mid June 2026 was the second kind.

The Royal Government of Cambodia and UNAIDS jointly announced that Cambodia had achieved the 95-95-95 targets. Asia News Network, republishing a report from The Phnom Penh Post on 15 June, described the moment as a "historic achievement" in the words of the United Nations. UNAIDS followed on 18 June with a feature story under a headline that tells you exactly where it believed the credit lay: Cambodia had reached the targets, it said, by showing the power of community leadership.

The targets themselves sound technical, but they describe something very human. They mean that:

1. 95 per cent of people living with HIV know their status.
2. 95 per cent of those who know their status are receiving antiretroviral treatment.
3. 95 per cent of those on treatment have a suppressed viral load.

That third number is the one that changes lives most visibly. When the virus is suppressed by medication, a person living with HIV can expect a near normal life span, and the risk of passing the virus to a sexual partner becomes almost zero. In other words, every person who reaches the end of that chain is both protected and protecting others.

UNAIDS first set out these targets in its 2014 Fast-Track strategy as milestones on the road to ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. As NPR's Durrie Bouscaren reported on 6 August 2026, only 11 countries have reached them so far. Most are in Africa. Denmark is the only European country on the list. Cambodia is the first from Asia and the Pacific, a region of more than four billion people.

This was not a first for Cambodia, either. In 2017 it was one of only seven countries in the world to reach the earlier 90-90-90 targets, three years ahead of schedule. A small, lower middle income country has now done it twice.

How bad it was

To understand why this matters, you have to remember where Cambodia started.

In the 1990s, Cambodia was emerging from decades of war, genocide and isolation. Its health system had been shattered under the Khmer Rouge and rebuilt from almost nothing. Into that fragile setting came one of the fastest growing HIV epidemics in Asia.

NPR's reporting sets out the scale. By 1999, about 2 per cent of Cambodian adults aged 15 to 49 were living with HIV. At the peak of the crisis, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, around 180,000 people had contracted the virus, and up to 15,000 people a year were dying. For a country of Cambodia's size, that was a catastrophe touching almost every community.

The virus spread through sex work, through a lack of information, and through the silence that stigma creates. People who tested positive often lost their jobs. Families hid sick relatives. Treatment, for most of the 1990s, simply did not exist in any affordable form.

Today the national adult HIV rate is below 0.5 per cent. About 76,000 Cambodians live with HIV, and most of them are on treatment. The distance between those two pictures is the story.

What the three numbers add up to

It is worth pausing on the arithmetic, because the targets compound. If 95 per cent of people know their status, and 95 per cent of those are on treatment, and 95 per cent of those have a suppressed viral load, then about 86 per cent of everyone living with HIV is virally suppressed. That is a simple calculation, not an official statistic, but it shows how demanding the targets are. A country that falls short at any one stage loses people at every stage after it.

Applied to Cambodia's estimated 76,000 people living with HIV, that rough calculation suggests something in the order of 65,000 people whose virus is controlled by medication. Each of them can expect to work, raise a family and grow old. And because a suppressed viral load makes sexual transmission almost impossible, each of them is also part of the reason new infections have fallen so far. Treatment, in other words, has become one of Cambodia's most powerful forms of prevention.

This is why public health experts talk about the targets as a chain. Testing without treatment saves no one. Treatment without support to stay on it lets people drop away. Every link has to hold, and in Cambodia it is communities who have done much of the work of holding it.

The building blocks

There is no single trick behind Cambodia's success. Reading the accounts from UNAIDS, the Cambodian government and the journalists who have reported on it, a few foundations stand out.

Early political will

Chamreun Chob Sok, executive director of KHANA, Cambodia's largest network of HIV nonprofits, told NPR that leadership from the king and the elected government in the 1990s mattered enormously. Prevention was treated as a national priority at a time when many governments in the region preferred not to talk about HIV at all.

A 1999 campaign promoted condom use in every commercial sex encounter under a blunt slogan: "No condom, no sex." It worked. In the early years, according to NPR, more than 80 per cent of sex workers reported using condoms.

Free medicine

In 2003, a grant of US$11.2 million from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria made HIV medication free in Cambodia. That decision turned a death sentence into a manageable condition for tens of thousands of people. It also changed the logic of testing: there is little reason to find out you have a disease if nothing can be done, but every reason to find out if treatment is waiting.

Removing the punishments

In 2002 Cambodia banned mandatory HIV blood tests as a condition of employment. That sounds like a small legal change. For people living with HIV, it was the difference between being able to earn a living and being pushed out of work. One of those people was Seum Sophal.

The people who would not give up

Mr Sophal was diagnosed more than 20 years ago, when stigma was everywhere and treatment options were few. He told UNAIDS that at the time, "I was ready to die."

NPR reported that he had been infected in 2000 and lost his job after compulsory testing revealed his status. In 2006 he moved to the countryside. A home based care program helped him recover. He did not simply survive; he went to work for others. Today he is an officer with the Forum of Networks of People Living with HIV and Key Populations, known as FoNPAMs, at the Health Action Coordinating Committee, and he began as a volunteer with Salvation Centre Cambodia, which provides home based support to people living with HIV.

When NPR asked him what kept him going, his answer was short: "I can survive because I have hope."

He is one of many. Dalish Prum, a program manager at CPN+, a support network for people living with HIV, was diagnosed in 2003. She now lives with HIV on treatment and spends her working life supporting others living with the virus. Her message to people

newly diagnosed, as reported by NPR, is worth repeating in full: "Honestly, please love yourself. You have dignity."

These are not side characters in Cambodia's story. They are its centre. The UNAIDS feature is explicit that community networks shaped the way services were designed and delivered. People living with HIV pushed for longer clinic hours, peer counselling, multi month dispensing of medicine so that patients did not have to travel to a clinic every few weeks, and testing that was easier to reach.

Meeting people where they are

Perhaps the most important lesson from Cambodia is one that sounds obvious and is routinely ignored: people seek healthcare where they feel accepted.

As the general population rate fell, HIV in Cambodia became concentrated among key populations, including sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender women and people who use drugs. These are groups who often face discrimination in ordinary health settings. If a clinic makes you feel judged, you do not go back.

So Cambodia's community organisations built services that people would actually use. NPR described several:

- **SmartGirl**, run by women who formerly worked in nightclubs and bars, offered finger prick testing, counselling and referrals to care.
- Outreach run by and for **men who have sex with men** included community hubs with coffee shops and internet access, places where people could drop in without feeling marked out.
- **Srey Sros**, run by transgender counsellors, encouraged early contact with health services.

In my view, this is the part of the story that deserves to travel furthest. Medicine was necessary, but it was not sufficient. What closed the gap between the drugs on the shelf and the person who needed them was trust, and trust was built by peers.

A safety net for the poorest

Treatment can be free and still be out of reach if the bus fare to the clinic costs a day's wages. Cambodia's response has drawn on wider social protection systems to deal with that problem.

UNAIDS points to the IDPoor system, which identifies and registers poor households. Those who qualify receive Equity Cards that give them free public healthcare through the Health Equity Fund, along with cash transfers and other social assistance. People living with HIV and members of key populations have been brought into this system, so that poverty does not quietly undo the gains of free medicine.

The Asia News Network report adds the newer tools that have been layered on top: expanded testing and treatment, integration of HIV services into the wider health system, long acting pre exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), HIV self testing, and subsidised care for people living with HIV and key populations.

What the leaders said

Cambodia's officials struck a notably careful tone. There was pride, but there was no victory lap.

Senior Minister Ieng Mouly, who chairs the National AIDS Authority, told UNAIDS: "This achievement is a source of national pride, but it also comes with responsibility." In the Phnom Penh Post report he added that the task now is "to ensure that progress is protected and sustained by increasing national ownership."

Health Minister Chheang Ra called for innovative HIV services "that respond to the needs of the community." Eamonn Murphy, UNAIDS regional director for Asia and the Pacific, said Cambodia's success "is built on strong political commitment, national leadership, long-term partnership." Patricia Ongpin, the UNAIDS country director, warned that "as external resources become more uncertain, protecting these gains will require sustained political leadership."

That last sentence points to the shadow over this good news.

The work is not finished

Reaching 95-95-95 is not the same as ending HIV. The joint statement from UNAIDS, the National AIDS Authority and the Ministry of Health said plainly that "the HIV response is not yet over."

There are three reasons for caution.

New infections continue

Cambodia still recorded an estimated 958 new HIV infections in 2025, according to the figures reported by The Phnom Penh Post. About 84 per cent of them were among key populations and their partners. The national goal is fewer than 250 new infections a year by 2030. That means the hardest part of the job, reaching people who are most marginalised, is still ahead.

Stigma has not disappeared

Dr Annette Sohn, director of amfAR's TREAT Asia program, told NPR: "The No. 1 challenge continues to be stigma." People living with HIV in Cambodia still report discrimination, including in health settings. Stigma is the one thing no pill can cure, and it is the thing most likely to stop someone from getting tested.

The money is getting tighter

A UNAIDS report released on 12 June 2026, ahead of a United Nations General Assembly meeting on HIV and AIDS, warned that funding cuts and under investment in prevention and community led services could reverse progress around the world. NPR noted that after delays and cuts to United States funding for global HIV prevention, programs for key populations were among the first to be cut in other countries. Those are precisely the programs that made the difference in Cambodia.

Cambodia is working on a sustainability plan to deal with falling external funding. Mr Sophal has argued for "social contracting", where the government funds community

groups to deliver agreed services. That would put the community organisations that built Cambodia's success on a stable domestic footing, rather than leaving them dependent on foreign grants.

Why this matters beyond Cambodia

It is tempting to treat health milestones as statistics. This one is worth treating as a lesson.

NPR noted that many Asian countries, including wealthy ones such as Japan and South Korea, have struggled to make gains of this kind. Money alone does not explain the difference. Cambodia had far fewer resources than many of its neighbours. What it had was a combination that any country can choose:

- Leaders willing to talk openly about an uncomfortable disease.
- Free treatment, made possible first by international partners and increasingly by national budgets.
- Laws that stopped punishing people for their HIV status.
- A health system that let people living with HIV, sex workers, gay men and transgender people design and run services for their own communities.
- A social safety net that made sure the poorest were not left out.

None of these is a secret. All of them require courage, because each asks a government to trust people it may once have preferred to ignore.

Thirty years of partnership

The 2026 milestone also marked an anniversary. The joint announcement noted that 2026 is the thirtieth year of UNAIDS support for Cambodia's HIV response. Over those three decades, the work has passed through many hands: Cambodian ministers and health officials, international donors such as the Global Fund, nonprofits such as KHANA, Salvation Centre Cambodia and CPN+, and thousands of outreach workers and volunteers whose names will never appear in a report.

That long view matters. Public health successes are rarely the work of a single government or a single funding cycle. They are built slowly, by people who keep showing up long after the cameras have gone. Cambodia's achievement belongs to all of them.

A reflection

There is a particular kind of hope in this story. It is not the hope of a sudden miracle cure, though the medicines are close to miraculous. It is the slower hope of people who refused to accept that their country's future had been decided for them.

When the epidemic was at its worst, Cambodia had every excuse to fail. It was poor. Its institutions were young. It had suffered more in the twentieth century than almost any nation on earth. And yet a generation of health workers, officials, international partners and, above all, people living with HIV built something that now leads the region.

I find the words of Seum Sophal and Dalish Prum the most powerful part of the record. One said he survives because he has hope. The other tells newly diagnosed people that

they have dignity. Put those two ideas together, hope and dignity, and you have a fair summary of how Cambodia reached 95-95-95.

The next step, getting new infections below 250 a year and keeping the gains when the funding gets harder, will test that hope again. But if any country has earned our confidence that it can be done, it is this one.

What readers can take from it

For leaders in any field, Cambodia offers three practical reminders:

1. **Design with the people you serve, not just for them.** The most effective HIV services in Cambodia were built by peers who understood what made people stay away.
2. **Remove the penalties that keep people hidden.** Banning employment based HIV testing did not cost much, but it allowed people to come forward without losing their livelihood.
3. **Protect what works when budgets tighten.** Community programs are often the first to be cut and the hardest to rebuild. Cambodia's own leaders are warning that its gains must be defended.

Good news rarely stays good on its own. It has to be protected, funded and renewed. Cambodia's achievement in June 2026 is a reason for celebration, and also a reason to make sure the world does not lose its nerve now.

Measure	Figure	Source
Adult HIV rate, 1999	About 2 per cent	NPR, August 2026
Peak annual deaths	Up to 15,000	NPR, August 2026
Adult HIV rate, 2026	Below 0.5 per cent	NPR, August 2026
People living with HIV	About 76,000	NPR, August 2026
Estimated new infections, 2025	958	The Phnom Penh Post via Asia News Network, June 2026
National goal for 2030	Fewer than 250 new infections a year	The Phnom Penh Post via Asia News Network, June 2026

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Building Their Own Future: The Kenyan Women Breaking Into Construction

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In Nairobi, a nonprofit called Buildher has trained more than 1,000 women from low income neighbourhoods as carpenters, tilers and painters, in an industry where women hold about 3 per cent of accredited trade roles. Its graduates are earning several times what they did before, and they are changing what a building site in Kenya looks like.

A site that looks different

Walk onto most construction sites in Kenya and the pattern is familiar. Men lay the tiles, hang the doors and fit the cabinets. Women, if they are there at all, are usually doing the lowest paid and least secure work: carrying water, hauling sand, cleaning up after the trades have gone.

On 5 July 2026, NPR published a report by journalist Christopher Clark, with photographs by Tommy Trenchard, that described a different picture. At Tatu City, a large private development on about 5,000 acres of former coffee plantations roughly 12 miles north of Nairobi, around 50 trainees from a nonprofit called Buildher had worked on finishing and interior jobs at a project called Eneo at Tatu Central. The tiling contractor on that project had hired seven of the women full time.

These were not volunteers or token hires. They were skilled tradespeople doing paid work to a professional standard, and they were the product of a deliberate effort to change who gets to build Kenya's cities.

The size of the gap

The starting point is stark. According to Kenya's National Construction Authority, as reported by NPR, women make up about 3 per cent of the country's accredited construction artisans. Construction is one of Kenya's biggest industries, worth more than 20 billion Canadian dollars in 2023 according to Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which has supported research on Buildher's work. Yet almost all of its skilled, better paid jobs go to men.

The reasons are not mysterious. The NPR report and the IDRC account between them list the barriers women face:

- Childcare responsibilities and a heavy share of unpaid household work.

- Financial instability that makes it hard to spend months in training without income.
- Resistance from husbands or parents who think construction is not suitable work for women.
- Harassment and a sense of being unsafe on male dominated sites.
- Doubt from male co workers about whether women can do the job.

One detail captures how deeply the industry was built around men. Until 2025, NPR reported, Kenyan construction sites were not legally required to provide separate toilets for women.

What Buildher does

Buildher was founded in 2019 and is based in Nairobi. Its chief executive and co founder is Tatu Gatere, an architect. The organisation runs year long training and internship programs in finishing trades, including carpentry, tiling and painting and decorating, along with shorter courses such as a six month tiling program. In 2026 it launched a solar installation course, its first step into more technical trades, with an intake of 16 trainees.

At the end of training, women can be accredited through the National Construction Authority. The IDRC notes that the authority waived accreditation fees for 200 Buildher trainees, a small policy decision that removed a real cost barrier.

What makes Buildher unusual is not the trade training itself, but everything wrapped around it. The program has been shaped by listening to its graduates and their employers, and the NPR and IDRC accounts explain how several pieces were added:

- **Physical fitness.** Employers said some trainees lacked stamina for long days on site, so Buildher added gym sessions, calisthenics and yoga. NPR described groups of about 30 trainees working out together.
- **Family outreach.** When friction at home led some women to drop out, Buildher increased its outreach to families, explaining the benefits of women earning a skilled wage.
- **Mental health support.** Harassment and low self esteem were driving women away from the industry, so the program now employs a mental health coach and holds group wellness sessions every two weeks. There is also an on site nutritionist.
- **Soft skills and money management.** Trainees learn problem solving, teamwork, communication and how to manage their earnings.

Taruri Gatere, Buildher's lead mental health officer, explained to the IDRC why this matters. If women are not equipped to deal with harassment and stereotyping, Taruri Gatere said, "it can be very detrimental to their careers." It is one thing to teach a woman to lay tiles. It is another to help her stay in an industry that has not always wanted her.

Why the finishing trades

Buildher's choice of trades is deliberate. Carpentry, tiling, painting and decorating are the finishing trades: the skilled work that turns a concrete shell into a home, a classroom or an office. They are visible, they are valued, and they are paid far better than the informal labouring jobs that women on Kenyan sites have usually been confined to.

They are also trades in which precision and care are rewarded. A tiler whose lines are straight, or a carpenter whose joints are tight, builds a reputation quickly, and reputation is what wins the next contract. For women who want eventually to run their own businesses, as many Buildher graduates say they do, the finishing trades offer a realistic path from employee to employer.

The new solar installation course takes that logic a step further. As Kenya expands its use of solar power, installers are in demand. Training women for a technical trade at the start of its growth, rather than trying to break into it decades later, is a way of making sure the next industry does not repeat the exclusion of the last one.

A day in the program

The NPR report gives a sense of what Buildher looks like day to day, and it is not what most people picture when they imagine vocational training.

Some sessions take place in a classroom or workshop, where a trainer such as Robert Ndungu leads a tiling class through the techniques of the trade. Others take place in a gym. On the day NPR visited the solar course, its intake of 16 trainees was attending an introductory presentation. Groups of around 30 women train together physically, building the strength and stamina that a full day on site demands.

Every two weeks, trainees take part in group wellness sessions, and the program's mental health coach and nutritionist are on hand. The IDRC account refers to the program's "Wellness Wednesdays." The idea is simple: a woman who is exhausted, unwell, anxious or isolated is far more likely to leave the industry, however good her technical skills are.

Then there is the internship. Trainees work on real sites with real employers, such as the developments at Tatu City. That matters for two reasons. It gives the women experience and references, and it gives employers the chance to see what a well trained woman can do.

The results

The numbers reported by NPR are striking.

Measure	Figure
Women trained since 2019	More than 1,000
Typical daily earnings before training	About US$1.50
Typical daily earnings within a year of graduating	About US$11 to US$12
Graduates still in construction 12 months after finishing	About 65 per cent (Dalberg, 2024)
Employers Buildher works with	About 150 in and around Nairobi
Target share of skilled construction jobs held by women by 2030	10 per cent, up from about 3 per cent

An increase in daily earnings of five to six times, within a year, is the kind of change that transforms a household. It means school fees paid on time, rent that is no longer a monthly crisis, and the ability to plan rather than simply survive.

The retention figure comes from a 2024 study by Dalberg, a global development advisory firm, which surveyed 354 women working in construction. The IDRC describes how Dalberg's research team surveyed Buildher students and women who had trained elsewhere, and ran interviews and group discussions. Graduates valued both their technical and soft skills, and employers appreciated their methodical approach to work.

Buildher's growth has come largely through word of mouth. Graduates recruit friends and neighbours. Every woman who walks onto a site with a tool belt is, in effect, an advertisement for what is possible.

In their own words

The women who have been through the program describe the change in ways that go well beyond money.

Diana Ojiambo, who now works as a machine operator at a Nairobi area furniture factory called Furniture International, told NPR about the confidence she gained: "I didn't know how to stand in front of people and speak up. But now I can." She hopes to start her own carpentry business.

She was also honest about what has not changed. "Inside this company, some of the men still think we ladies are not fit for this kind of work," she said. At the same factory, another former Buildher student, Jane Mwangi, works as a supervisor, checking measurements and overseeing work. Doubt and proof sit side by side on the same factory floor.

Margaret Klamaitha completed the six month tiling program and now works at Tatu City in her first full time construction job. Her ambition is to move into quality control and eventually run her own construction business. Her summary of what it takes was simple: "It's all about the mindset."

Earlier graduates told similar stories to the IDRC. Sharon Okiya, who graduated in 2022, said: "Buildher made me feel like I'm a strong lady." Rahab Kiarie, a 2021 graduate who has since built a beauty and cosmetics business, said: "At first, people underestimated us, but now they respect us."

And Robert Ndungu, the trainer who leads the tiling class, said of watching his students progress: "That really inspires me." It is worth noting that some of the strongest supporters of women in the trades are the men who teach them.

Changing the industry, not just the women

Training individual women is valuable. But Buildher's leaders know that if the industry stays the same, the women they train will keep running into the same walls. So the organisation has turned its attention to employers and policy.

According to NPR, Tatu Gatere now works with dozens of firms on harassment, equal pay and basic conditions for women on site. The IDRC describes a wider agenda:

- Sharing Buildher's curriculum with local technical and vocational training institutions, so that the approach spreads beyond one nonprofit.

- Producing gender sensitive guidelines for the industry.
- Working with Kenya's Affordable Housing Program to add gender specific facilities and equipment on its sites.
- Advocating for gender provisions in a new Kenyan building code, including minimum hiring percentages for women and safe systems for reporting harassment.

Tatu Gatere has been frank about her frustration with the pace of change. "We shouldn't still be advocating for breadcrumbs," she told NPR. She also described the particular indignity that women in the industry face, even when they reach positions of authority: "You're supposed to be a decision maker, but you'd still be getting catcalled and harassed by men."

Why this is good news for everyone

It would be easy to read this as a story about women's rights alone. It is that, but it is also a story about economics, and about cities.

Kenya, like much of Africa, is urbanising quickly. Nairobi needs housing, schools, clinics and offices, and it needs skilled people to build and finish them. An industry that draws its skilled workforce from only half the population is leaving talent unused. Every woman who becomes a qualified tiler or carpenter adds to the country's capacity to build.

Employers, too, benefit. The Dalberg research found that employers appreciated Buildher trainees' methodical approach to work, and one developer told NPR that contractors were impressed by the women's professionalism. A pipeline of trained, accredited workers who show up and do careful work is good for business.

And there is a multiplier effect at home. When a woman's daily earnings rise from US$1.50 to US$11, the benefit flows to her children, her extended family and her neighbourhood. Several of the women interviewed hope to start their own businesses, which would create jobs for others.

The role of evidence

One feature of the Buildher story deserves particular credit: its willingness to be measured. Many well meaning programs run for years without ever finding out whether they work. Buildher partnered with Dalberg to survey its graduates and compare them with women who had trained elsewhere, and it has used what it learned to change its program.

The IDRC account describes how those findings have been shared with training institutions, employers, industry associations and Kenya's National Construction Authority, and with policymakers. Evidence is what turns a good local project into a model that others can adopt. It is also what protects a program when money gets tight, because funders are more willing to back something that can show its results.

A reflection on what hope looks like

I am struck by how practical this story is. There is no grand gesture at its heart. There is a gym session, a tiling class, a fortnightly wellness group, a conversation with a sceptical

husband, a waived accreditation fee, a separate toilet on a building site. None of these on its own changes the world. Together they change a woman's life, and a thousand lives together start to change an industry.

That is the kind of hope I find most convincing. It is not the hope of waiting for someone else to fix things. It is the hope of people who looked at an industry that had no place for them, and set about building one.

Buildher's goal is to lift women's share of skilled construction jobs in Kenya from about 3 per cent to 10 per cent by 2030. That may sound modest. In practice it would mean thousands more women earning a skilled wage, and a generation of girls who grow up seeing women on scaffolding as nothing unusual at all.

The challenges still ahead

It would be wrong to suggest that the problem has been solved. Buildher's own figures show how far there is to go.

About 65 per cent of graduates were still working in construction a year after finishing the program, according to the 2024 Dalberg study. That is an encouraging figure for a sector that has been hostile to women, but it also means that roughly a third had left. Some will have moved into other good work, as Rahab Kiarie did when she built her own beauty business. Others will have been pushed out by the same barriers that Buildher was set up to address: harassment, family pressure, caring responsibilities and doubt.

And 3 per cent remains 3 per cent. Even if Buildher reaches its goal of lifting women's share of skilled construction jobs to 10 per cent by 2030, nine in ten skilled workers on Kenyan sites will still be men. Changing an entire industry is the work of a generation, not a single program.

The women interviewed by NPR were clear eyed about this. Several described male co workers who still doubted them. Tatu Gatere's comment about "breadcrumbs" reflects a real impatience with how slowly basic conditions have changed. Hope, in this story, is not the absence of difficulty. It is the decision to keep going despite it.

A familiar gap

Readers in Australia, the United Kingdom or North America should resist the temptation to see this as a uniquely Kenyan problem. In many wealthy countries, women remain a small minority of qualified tradespeople on building sites, and governments and industry bodies have spent years trying to change that, with mixed results.

What is distinctive about Buildher is not the problem but the response. Rather than treating the gap as a matter of individual choice, it has looked at everything that stops women entering and staying in the trades, and tried to deal with each of those things in turn. That is a model any country could learn from.

Family as part of the solution

One of the most thoughtful parts of Buildher's approach is its recognition that a woman's career does not begin and end at the site gate. When friction at home led some trainees

to quit, the organisation did not treat it as a private matter beyond its reach. It reached out to families directly, explaining what a skilled wage could mean for the whole household. A sceptical husband or parent who becomes a supporter can be the difference between a woman finishing her training and abandoning it.

Lessons for leaders anywhere

The Buildher model offers lessons that apply well beyond Nairobi and well beyond construction:

1. **Train the whole person.** Technical skills alone did not keep women in the industry. Fitness, mental health support, family engagement and financial skills made the difference.
2. **Listen to employers and graduates, then adapt.** Many of Buildher's most important features were added because someone told them what was not working.
3. **Remove small barriers that have large effects.** A waived accreditation fee or a separate toilet can decide whether a woman stays in a job.
4. **Change the system as well as the individual.** Training women is not enough if sites remain unsafe. Buildher works with employers and policymakers so that its graduates enter a better industry.
5. **Let success recruit.** Word of mouth from graduates has driven Buildher's growth. People believe what they can see.

Somewhere in Nairobi this year, a woman who once carried water across a building site is now tiling its floors. That is what progress looks like, one room at a time.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Fifty Dollars at a Time: The Church Congregation Wiping Out Its Neighbours' Medical Debt

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

A small Moravian congregation in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, whose members vote very differently, has spent four years quietly retiring millions of dollars in medical debt for people they will never meet. Its story, reported in June 2026, is a reminder that kindness does not have to wait for agreement.

A list of names, and a flame

Earlier in 2026, at the close of its eighth campaign, the Reverend John Jackman stood before his congregation at Trinity Moravian Church and set fire to a list of names.

There were 1,631 of them. Each belonged to a resident of Forsyth County, North Carolina, whose unpaid medical bills had just been wiped out. None of those people had asked the church for help. Most of them, in all likelihood, had never set foot inside it. They were simply neighbours who had fallen behind on hospital bills, and whose debts a small congregation had decided to buy and cancel.

The story was reported by Noam N. Levey of KFF Health News on 30 June 2026, and carried by NPR. Its headline captured what makes it unusual: the church members disagree on politics, and together they are wiping out medical debt.

The church and its pastor

Trinity Moravian Church is 114 years old, a red brick building near Winston-Salem's former textile mills. It has about 200 members. Its pastor, John Jackman, has been in ministry for more than four decades.

The Moravian Church has deep roots in this part of North Carolina. Moravian settlers founded the town of Salem in the eighteenth century, and their tradition of community, simplicity and practical service still shapes the city that grew up around it. Trinity is a modest congregation within that tradition, not a megachurch with a large budget.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, KFF reported, more people began turning to the church for help. Jackman saw at close range how many families in his community were carrying debts they could not pay, and how often those debts came from illness. He went looking for a way to help that would go beyond the occasional emergency grant.

How you buy someone's debt

What he found was a nonprofit called Undue Medical Debt, previously known as RIP Medical Debt. It was founded by former debt collection industry executives who knew something most people do not: medical debt is bought and sold, and it is cheap.

When a patient cannot pay a hospital bill, the hospital may eventually write it off and sell the debt, often in large bundles, to collectors. Because creditors expect most of these debts never to be repaid, they sell for a tiny fraction of their face value. A debt collector who buys a thousand dollars of old medical debt for a few dollars can still profit by chasing a small number of people for payment.

Undue Medical Debt turns that market inside out. It buys the same portfolios of debt, at the same low prices, from hospitals and collectors. Then, instead of chasing anyone, it simply cancels the debts. The people who owed the money are notified that the debt has been forgiven.

KFF explained the arithmetic in plain terms. Because medical debt can be bought for pennies on the dollar, a small donation goes a very long way.

The campaigns

Trinity Moravian's first campaign, in 2022, set a goal of raising US$5,000 to retire about US$500,000 of medical debt held by Forsyth County residents. It reached that goal in six weeks. Most of the donations were under US$50.

That set the pattern. The church calls its work the Debt Jubilee Project, and it has kept going. By the time its eighth campaign wrapped up earlier in 2026, it had raised more than US$17,000 in that round alone and retired more than US$2.2 million in debt.

Jackman described the fundraising with a pastor's dry humour: "This is the easiest money I've ever raised." Members, he said, would simply write cheques for US$25 or US$50.

Campaign	Raised	Debt retired
First (2022)	Goal of US$5,000, reached in six weeks	About US$500,000
Eighth (completed 2026)	More than US$17,000	More than US$2.2 million

Source: KFF Health News, June 2026.

How a campaign works

For anyone wondering how a congregation actually does this, the process is straightforward.

1. **The community sets a goal.** Trinity Moravian chose a dollar target and a place: Forsyth County, where its members live and worship.
2. **Members and neighbours give.** Most gifts to Trinity's campaigns were small, often US$25 or US$50, collected over a few weeks.

3. **The nonprofit buys the debt.** Undue Medical Debt uses the money to buy portfolios of unpaid medical bills linked to people in the chosen area, generally focusing on people with lower incomes or with debts that are large relative to what they earn.
4. **The debt is cancelled.** Rather than collecting, the nonprofit retires the debts and notifies the people who owed them.
5. **The community marks the moment.** At Trinity, that meant a ceremony and a list of names consigned to the flames.

The figures reported by KFF show just how far the money stretches. Raising about US$5,000 to retire about US$500,000 works out at roughly one cent per dollar of debt. In the eighth campaign, more than US$17,000 retired more than US$2.2 million, which is under one cent per dollar. Those are rough calculations from the published totals, but they make the point: a single US$50 cheque can relieve thousands of dollars of someone else's burden.

There is a moral clarity in that arithmetic. The same debts that a collector might pursue for profit, a church can buy for the same price and simply let go.

Neighbours who disagree

What drew national attention to Trinity Moravian was not only the scale of the giving, but who was doing it.

The congregation includes people across the political spectrum. KFF spoke with members who described themselves very differently. Catherine Coe, who works in hospital accounting and is politically conservative, put it this way: "We're all just one medical bill from financial ruin." Paul Sluder, a former credit union debt collector with no party affiliation, said the system was "out of whack." Cynthia Tesh said people should look out for one another.

These are not people who would agree about much on election night. They might argue about taxes, immigration or the role of government in healthcare. But faced with a neighbour drowning in hospital bills, they found that they agreed on the thing that mattered.

That is consistent with wider evidence. KFF cited a 2025 survey by Undue Medical Debt and the research organisation NORC which found that more than three quarters of both Republicans and Democrats opposed allowing collection agencies to garnish wages for medical debt. On this issue, at least, the country is less divided than its politics suggest.

Jackman's own philosophy is disarmingly simple: "We cannot fix everything, but we have to fix what we can in the place where we're planted."

Why medical debt matters

For Australian readers, it can be hard to picture how large medical debt looms in American life. Australia's Medicare system means that most people do not receive large bills for emergency hospital care. In the United States, the picture is very different.

KFF Health News, which has investigated medical debt for years, reported an estimated 100 million American adults carrying some form of healthcare debt. That debt is not

evenly spread. It falls hardest on people who are already struggling: those with chronic illness, those without good insurance, and those who lose income because they are too sick to work.

Medical debt can follow people for years. It can damage credit ratings, making it harder to rent a home or borrow money. It can lead to wage garnishment and court action. And it can stop people from seeking care they need, because they are afraid of adding to what they already owe.

Debt cancellation does not fix the system that creates the debt. Jackman himself does not claim it does. But for the 1,631 people whose names went into the flames this year, the relief is real and immediate.

The meaning of Jubilee

The name the church chose for its work is not accidental.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Leviticus describes a Jubilee year, held every fiftieth year, in which debts were to be released, land returned to its original families and people freed from bondage. Whether or not ancient Israel ever practised it fully, the idea has echoed through centuries of religious and social thought. It expresses a simple moral intuition: that no one should be trapped forever by debt, and that a community has a duty to reset the scales from time to time.

At the ceremony this year, KFF reported, Jackman tied the church's work directly to that tradition, saying "we act to forgive the debts of many of our neighbors as God has forgiven our debts."

You do not have to share his faith to recognise the power of that idea. Many traditions, religious and secular, have some version of it: that mercy is not a weakness, and that a society is measured by how it treats people who have fallen behind.

Ripples

The Debt Jubilee Project has had effects beyond Forsyth County. KFF reported that the church's work helped inspire North Carolina government officials to take on medical debt, and it drew praise from the conservative radio host Glenn Beck. A tiny congregation with a few hundred members found itself part of a much larger conversation about how hospitals and governments treat patients who cannot pay.

That is one of the quiet lessons of this story. Small acts, repeated faithfully, can shift what larger institutions believe is possible. When a church of 200 people can retire millions of dollars in debt with cheques for US$25 and US$50, it becomes harder for anyone to argue that relief is unaffordable.

The power of a ritual

It would have been easy for Trinity Moravian to retire the debts quietly, announce the total in a newsletter and move on. Instead, it chose to mark the moment with a ceremony.

The act of burning a list of names is old and potent symbolism. Fire has long stood for purification and release. A list of debtors is, in a sense, a record of people bound by obligation. To burn it in public is to say, as clearly as anything can, that the obligation is gone and will not return.

The ritual also does something for the givers. Donations to large causes can feel abstract. A cheque disappears into a fund and the results are reported months later as a statistic. At Trinity, members could see what their gifts had done: 1,631 names, each one a household that would no longer receive calls from a collector. That visibility is part of why the campaigns keep succeeding.

The limits of charity

There is a long running debate about projects like this, and it is worth acknowledging.

Critics of debt cancellation charities do not usually object to the relief itself. Their concern is that charity can make a broken system easier to tolerate. If churches and donors keep buying and cancelling medical debt, the argument goes, there is less pressure on hospitals, insurers and governments to stop the debt being created in the first place.

That is a fair point, and Jackman's own words suggest he would not disagree. He has never claimed that his congregation can fix American healthcare. His line about fixing what you can "in the place where we're planted" is an argument for acting locally while the bigger fight goes on, not a substitute for it.

In practice, the two can reinforce each other. KFF reported that the church's work helped inspire state officials to act. Small, visible acts of relief can make the case for larger reform by showing how much need exists, and how cheaply some of it could be met.

What this story is, and is not

It is worth being careful about what this story claims.

It is not a solution to the American healthcare system. The underlying causes of medical debt, including high prices, gaps in insurance and the way hospitals bill and collect, remain. Debt relief charities themselves generally say that cancellation is a response to a problem, not a cure for it.

It is not a story about a wealthy benefactor. The striking thing about Trinity Moravian is that its members are ordinary people giving modest amounts. At least one longtime member described seeing medical debt up close.

And it is not a story about everyone agreeing. The members of this congregation still disagree about plenty. What they share is a willingness to act together on the thing they do agree on.

Why small gifts matter

There is a common assumption that changing lives requires large sums of money: a major donor, a foundation grant, a government program. Trinity Moravian's story challenges that assumption.

Its first campaign succeeded mostly on gifts of under US$50. Its eighth campaign raised more than US$17,000 from a congregation of about 200 people. None of those gifts, on its own, would make headlines. Together, they relieved millions of dollars of debt.

Small gifts have another advantage that is easy to overlook. They allow almost everyone to take part. A pensioner, a young family, a worker on modest wages: each can write a cheque for US$25 and know that it will relieve far more than its face value. When giving is open to everyone, the act of giving becomes something a whole community shares, rather than something a few wealthy people do on its behalf.

That shared participation may be why the project has held together across political lines. No one is being asked to sign up to a manifesto. They are being asked to help a neighbour, in a way they can afford, with a result they can see.

A model that travels

The underlying idea is not unique to Winston-Salem. Across the United States, congregations, community groups and local governments have used the same mechanism to cancel medical debt in their own areas. What Trinity Moravian adds is a demonstration that a modest, politically mixed congregation can sustain the effort year after year, and that doing so can strengthen rather than strain the bonds between its members.

For readers outside the United States, the lesson is less about medical debt specifically than about the method. Look for the places where a small amount of money, applied cleverly, can lift a large burden. Find the common ground that people across divides already share. Then act, locally and visibly, and let the results speak.

A reflection

I find this story moving for a reason that has little to do with money.

We live in a time when public life often feels like a contest between camps that cannot hear each other. It is easy to conclude that cooperation across those lines has become impossible. Trinity Moravian is a small piece of evidence that it has not.

A hospital accountant who leans conservative, a former debt collector with no party, a fellow member who simply believes people should look out for one another: they sit in the same pews, write the same small cheques and watch the same list of names burn. They have not resolved their differences. They have decided that their differences are not a reason to leave a neighbour in trouble.

There is a lesson there for leaders of every kind. You do not need to win every argument before you can do something good. Sometimes the most useful question is not "what do we disagree about?" but "what can we fix, here, together?"

What any community can learn

The Debt Jubilee Project offers a model that other groups have copied in various forms. Its lessons are simple:

1. **Find the point of leverage.** Because medical debt sells for a fraction of its face value, every dollar donated relieves many dollars of debt. Understanding how a system works can reveal where a small effort has a large effect.
2. **Keep the ask small and the goal concrete.** Trinity Moravian asked for modest gifts toward a clear target, and it met that target in weeks.
3. **Make it visible.** Burning a list of names is a powerful ritual. It shows people what their giving achieved.
4. **Act where you are planted.** The church focused on its own county. Local action builds trust and makes the results tangible.
5. **Build on common ground.** A cause that unites people across divides can be more durable than one that depends on everyone sharing the same views.

A word on dignity

One detail of the Debt Jubilee Project is easy to miss. The people whose debts are cancelled do not have to ask for help, prove their poverty to the church or stand up in front of anyone. The relief simply arrives. For many people, the shame of debt is almost as heavy as the debt itself. A model that lifts the burden without demanding a public confession respects the dignity of the people it helps, and that may be its quietest virtue of all.

Closing

Somewhere in Forsyth County this year, 1,631 people opened a letter or heard the news that a debt they had been dreading was gone. Most will never know the names of the people who paid it off. They will not know that the money came in cheques of US$25 and US$50 from a small brick church near the old mills, or that the people who wrote those cheques could not agree on who should be president.

Perhaps that is the most hopeful part of all. Kindness, in this case, did not need a shared ideology. It needed only neighbours willing to look up from their disagreements and notice someone in need.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

When Bluey Spoke Yolŋu Matha: A Children's Cartoon and the Living Languages of Arnhem Land

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

For NAIDOC Week 2026, five episodes of *Bluey* were broadcast in a First Nations language for the first time, voiced by Yolŋu community members in north-east Arnhem Land. At the Garma Festival a few weeks later, the episodes screened on opening night on Yolŋu Country, with the world's favourite blue heeler speaking Yolŋu Matha on the big screen.

A familiar dog, a new voice

There are not many things that unite Australian households as reliably as *Bluey*. The animated series about a family of blue heelers in Brisbane has become one of the most watched children's programs on the planet. According to the Walt Disney Company, as reported by AAP, it was the most watched series globally on Disney+ in 2025. It is available in more than 140 countries and has been dubbed into more than 20 languages. It has won a Peabody Award and back to back Television Critics Association Awards.

In July 2026, it added a language unlike any of the others.

On 5 July, at the start of NAIDOC Week, five episodes of *Bluey* translated into Yolŋu Matha premiered on ABC iview. It was the first time the show had been broadcast in a First Nations language. National Indigenous Times, reporting the announcement on 17 June, described it as a landmark initiative. The Sector, which covers early childhood education, called it "a landmark moment for Australian children's television."

Who made it

The project was led by Yolŋu Radio and the Aboriginal Resource and Development Services (ARDS), working with the ABC and Ludo Studio, the Brisbane company that produces *Bluey*.

Crucially, it was made on Country. SBS News reported that each episode was produced at Yolŋu Radio's studio in north-east Arnhem Land, and that local Yolŋu community members voiced the characters:

- **Bandit** is voiced by Dimathaya Burarrwanga, a founding member of the Yolŋu surf rock band King Stingray.
- **Chilli** is voiced by Rosie Munuggurr.
- **Grandad** is voiced by Andrew Gurruwiwi, a respected Yolŋu Elder and musician.
- **Bluey and Bingo** are voiced by local Yolŋu children.

The five episodes chosen were *The Beach*, *The Creek*, *Sleepytime*, *Grandad* and *Rug Island*, all from the first two seasons. They were selected, according to the partners, for their themes of family, connection and Country. National Indigenous Times reported that some English words in the original scripts were replaced with Yolŋu concepts and stories, so that the episodes were adapted, not merely translated.

What Yolŋu Matha is

Yolŋu Matha is not a single language in the way English is. It is a family of closely related languages and clan varieties spoken by Yolŋu people across north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The name itself means, roughly, "the tongue of the Yolŋu people."

These languages are very much alive. In many Yolŋu communities, children grow up speaking a Yolŋu language as their first language, with English learned later. The AIATSIS language database AustLang records 4,282 speakers of Djambarrpuyŋu, one of the main Yolŋu languages, at the 2016 Census.

That makes Yolŋu Matha one of the stronger Indigenous language groups in Australia. It is a strength that has been fought for. Across the continent, the story of First Nations languages since colonisation has been one of enormous loss. AIATSIS, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, notes that there are more than 250 Indigenous languages in Australia, including around 800 dialects. Many are no longer spoken fluently by anyone, and many more are held by only a handful of Elders. Communities across the country are working to revive and strengthen them.

A language that has reached the nation before

This is not the first time Yolŋu Matha has found its way into living rooms across Australia. In 1991, the band Yothu Yindi released "Treaty", a song sung in English and in Gumatj, one of the Yolŋu languages. It became a national hit and one of the most recognisable Australian songs of its era. For many Australians, it was one of the first times they had heard a First Nations language on commercial radio.

The connection runs deeper than coincidence. The Garma Festival, where the *Bluey* episodes screened, is run by the Yothu Yindi Foundation. And the man voicing Bandit, Dimathaya Burarrwanga, is a member of King Stingray, a band that has carried Yolŋu language and music to new audiences in the 2020s. Yolŋu musicians and storytellers have long understood that popular culture can carry language further than any classroom.

Learning both ways

North-east Arnhem Land also has a long history of bilingual education. Since the 1970s, some schools in Yolŋu communities have taught in both a Yolŋu language and English, an approach often described as "both ways" learning: children learn the knowledge of their own culture and the knowledge of the wider world side by side, each respected on its own terms.

That approach has had its supporters and its critics, and its funding and policy settings have changed over the decades. But its central idea is the same one that underpins the

Bluey project. Children learn best when they see their own language and culture treated as valuable, not as something to be left behind at the school gate.

A cartoon cannot replace a teacher, a bilingual curriculum or a grandparent's stories. What it can do is sit alongside them, reinforcing at home the message that a child's first language belongs in every part of life, including the fun parts.

Why a cartoon matters

It is fair to ask whether a children's cartoon can make much difference to the survival of a language. The answer, I think, is that it can make more difference than you might expect.

Languages live or die in childhood. A language that children hear at home, in school, on the radio and on screen is one they are likely to keep and pass on. A language that disappears from the media children love sends a quiet message that it belongs to the past, or to older people, or to formal occasions.

When a Yolŋu child sees Bluey and Bingo speaking their language, voiced by children from their own communities, that message is reversed. Their language is not only for ceremony or for Elders. It is for fun, for family, for the things every child cares about. It belongs on the same screen as everything else.

ARDS co chief executives Julia Wormer and Sylvia Nulpinditj described the logic simply: "Bluey has become a shared language for families right across Australia." By putting Yolŋu Matha inside that shared language, the project invites Yolŋu children to see themselves in it, and invites everyone else to hear a language most Australians have never encountered.

Kelly Williams, the ABC's Director of First Nations Strategy, said the broadcaster was committed to "ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are part of the national conversation."

Timed for NAIDOC Week

The timing of the premiere was no accident. NAIDOC Week, held each July, is the annual national celebration of the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Schools, workplaces and communities across Australia mark it with events, flag raisings and learning activities.

Releasing the Yolŋu Matha episodes at the start of NAIDOC Week placed them in front of families and educators at precisely the moment many were looking for ways to engage with First Nations cultures. For a teacher or early childhood educator planning NAIDOC activities, an episode of *Bluey* in Yolŋu Matha is an unusually accessible resource: familiar, joyful and authentic, made by the community whose language it carries.

Bluey at Garma

The episodes had a second premiere, in a very different setting.

The Garma Festival, held each year by the Yothu Yindi Foundation at the Gulkula ceremonial site about 40 kilometres from Nhulunbuy on the Gove Peninsula, is Australia's largest Indigenous cultural gathering. The 2026 festival opened on Friday 31 July. Its

theme, reported by AAP, was "Bukmak," a Yolŋu word the festival translated as "all of us, everyone, together."

That first night, after the evening Buŋgul ceremony and a live broadcast of an AFL match between the Western Bulldogs and Fremantle, the Yolŋu Matha episodes of *Bluey* screened at Garma Cinema at 8.30pm, with the Bluey character in attendance. SBS News reported that Bluey, in costume, wowed crowds during the appearance at Garma.

A senior high school student told SBS: "It means so much to me, and it makes me so proud." It is hard to think of a better measure of success than that.

Festival ambassador Jack Thompson, speaking at the opening, said: "We can only navigate our uncertain future if we embrace the concept of Bukmak." A cartoon dog speaking Yolŋu Matha to Yolŋu families, on Yolŋu Country, at a festival whose theme is "everyone, together," is about as clear an expression of that idea as you could imagine.

Why dubbing matters

There is an important difference between subtitling a program and dubbing it. Subtitles let a viewer read a translation while hearing the original language. Dubbing replaces the voices entirely, so that the characters themselves speak the new language.

For young children, who are often not yet able to read, the difference is decisive. A subtitled *Bluey* would still be an English program. A dubbed *Bluey* is a Yolŋu Matha program, in which Bandit, Chilli, Bluey and Bingo sound like people from the child's own community. The jokes, the songs and the moments of tenderness all arrive in the child's own language.

Dubbing is also harder and more expensive. It requires voice actors, translators who understand both the language and the humour of the original, recording studios and careful editing. That the partners chose to do it this way, and to do it on Country with Yolŋu voices, says a great deal about how seriously they took the task.

The episodes themselves

The five episodes chosen are gentle stories, even by the standards of a famously gentle show. Several centre on time spent outdoors, at the beach or by a creek, and on the small discoveries children make when adults give them room to explore. *Grandad* is about a visit to Bluey's grandfather. *Sleepytime* follows the youngest sister, Bingo, through a night of dreams, and is often described by viewers as one of the most moving episodes the series has produced.

The partners said the episodes were chosen for their themes of family, connection and Country. Those are themes that sit naturally in Yolŋu culture, where relationships between people, and between people and land, are central to identity. The choice was not only about which episodes children would enjoy, but about which stories would translate most meaningfully into a Yolŋu way of seeing the world.

The view from the studio

Sam Moor, a producer at Ludo Studio, told AAP on 23 July that the idea had been around since the show launched in 2018, and that the ABC had been a major supporter. "It felt like a natural step for us to make one of the most popular shows in the world into an Australian language," he said.

He also explained why it mattered to the people who make the show: "It makes every family feel seen."

Asked about more translations, Moor said the team was talking with several more groups, but cautioned that it is not a quick process and that there are so many different languages. He added that the team was "very keen" to do a Brisbane language, "because that's where the show is made."

That caution is worth respecting. Translating a show properly into a First Nations language requires speakers, translators, cultural advisers and community consent. It cannot be done by software or by outsiders working alone. The Yolŋu Matha episodes worked because they were made by Yolŋu people, in a Yolŋu studio, on Yolŋu terms.

The bigger picture

This project sits within a much larger national and global effort to keep Indigenous languages alive.

In Australia, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes Outcome 16: that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing." Its target is that by 2031 there will be "a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken." Unlike some Closing the Gap targets, this one depends heavily on communities themselves: on language centres, bilingual schools, radio stations, artists and Elders.

Internationally, the United Nations has declared 2022 to 2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, recognising that many of the world's languages are under threat and that their loss is also a loss of knowledge, identity and connection to land.

Against that background, five episodes of a cartoon are a small thing. But small things are how languages survive. A song on the radio. A picture book. A sign at the school gate. A grandmother telling a story. A favourite cartoon in your own words.

A community radio station at the centre

It is worth dwelling on the fact that the project was led from Arnhem Land rather than from a city studio. Yolŋu Radio is a community broadcaster that serves Yolŋu audiences in their own languages, and the Aboriginal Resource and Development Services has worked with Yolŋu communities for decades on education, media and community development.

Organisations like these are often invisible to most Australians, yet they do much of the daily work of keeping languages strong. They record Elders, broadcast news and music, produce educational materials and train young people in media skills. When a project as

high profile as *Bluey* chooses to work through them, it brings resources, recognition and new skills into the community, rather than taking content out of it.

That is a model worth copying. The most respectful way for a large broadcaster or production company to engage with First Nations languages is not to commission a translation from afar, but to partner with the community organisations that already hold the knowledge, and let them lead.

What it offers everyone else

For the great majority of Australians who do not speak an Indigenous language, the Yolŋu Matha episodes offer something different but no less valuable. They are a small, friendly invitation to notice that the continent we share has always been multilingual.

Many Australians grow up without ever hearing a First Nations language spoken in daily life. Hearing Bandit and Chilli speak Yolŋu Matha, in episodes many families already know by heart, makes that language familiar rather than foreign. It is hard to value something you have never encountered. A cartoon is a gentle place to start.

For educators and families

The Sector noted that the release fits closely with the Early Years Learning Framework, which emphasises respect for diversity and children's connections to culture, community and Country. For early childhood educators, the episodes offer a natural way to start conversations with children about language, culture and storytelling, and to build reconciliation into everyday learning rather than treating it as a special occasion.

For families anywhere in Australia, there is something valuable in simply watching. Most Australians have never heard Yolŋu Matha spoken. Hearing a familiar story told in an unfamiliar language is a gentle way of understanding something important: that this continent has always been home to many languages, and that many of them are still here.

A reflection

I like this story because it is so ordinary, and so significant at the same time.

Nothing about it was forced. A popular show, made with care, chose to share its stories in a language that has been spoken on this continent for thousands of years. A community radio station in Arnhem Land did the work. A Yolŋu musician gave voice to the most beloved dad in children's television. And children at Garma could hear the same jokes that children laugh at in Brisbane, Bristol and Boston, in their own language.

Hope does not always look like a breakthrough or a rescue. Sometimes it looks like recognition. It looks like a child hearing their language on the big screen and feeling proud. If language is the way a people carries its knowledge from one generation to the next, then every child who hears Yolŋu Matha from Bluey is a small guarantee that the knowledge will travel on.

Bukmak, as Garma reminded us this year. All of us, everyone, together.

What we can take from it

1. **Representation shapes belief.** Children who see their language in the media they love are more likely to value it and keep it.
2. **Make it with the community, on Country.** The project's credibility came from being made by Yolŋu people at Yolŋu Radio, not imposed from outside.
3. **Popular culture can carry serious purpose.** A cartoon reached children in a way a policy document never could.
4. **Respect the pace.** Proper translation into First Nations languages takes time, consent and care. Ludo Studio's caution about rushing further translations is a sign of good faith, not reluctance.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Wings Over the Trent: White Storks Return to England's Midlands After 600 Years

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In July 2026, white storks arrived at a Derbyshire wetland beside the River Trent, part of an effort to bring breeding storks back to the English Midlands for the first time in more than six centuries. It is a small flock with a large meaning: proof that lost wildlife can come home when people make room for it.

A homecoming in Derbyshire

On Monday 27 July 2026, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust announced that white storks had arrived at Willington Wetlands, its 113 acre nature reserve beside the River Trent in southern Derbyshire.

It said the birds marked the return of storks to the Midlands for the first time in more than 600 years.

Three juvenile storks arrived, settling into a purpose built, predator proof enclosure in a quiet conservation area of the reserve. The enclosure was designed for breeding, chick rearing and what conservationists call "soft release": a gradual, managed return of birds into the wider landscape rather than simply opening a door. The Trust hopes the resident birds will act as a magnet, because wild storks passing along the Trent Valley are more likely to stop and settle where they can see others of their kind.

Katie Last, the Trust's Living Landscape Officer, said: "We are thrilled to have welcomed our storks to Willington." She added that their return "offers a powerful opportunity to engage people in nature recovery."

Where the storks went

The white stork is one of the most recognisable birds in Europe. It stands about a metre tall, with white plumage, black flight feathers, long red legs and a long red bill. It builds enormous stick nests on rooftops, church towers, chimneys and tall trees, and it often returns to the same nest year after year.

For centuries, storks bred across much of Britain. Then they vanished. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust says they disappeared around the fourteenth century because of habitat loss and hunting. The last record of storks breeding in Britain is often dated to 1416, on St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh.

The reasons are not hard to understand. Storks feed in wet meadows, marshes and shallow water, eating frogs, insects, worms, small mammals and fish. As medieval Britain drained its wetlands for farming and grew its towns, the stork's world shrank. A large, conspicuous bird that nests in the open was also easy to hunt.

For the next six hundred years, white storks were visitors at best: occasional wanderers that turned up in spring, especially on England's south and east coasts, and then moved on.

The Sussex experiment

The return of storks to Derbyshire builds on a project that began in West Sussex a decade ago.

The Knepp Estate, a former intensive farm that its owners turned into one of Britain's best known rewilding projects, welcomed its first white storks in 2016. According to Knepp, the birds came from Poland, which has one of Europe's largest stork populations, and were cared for at Cotswold Wildlife Park before being brought to Sussex.

It took patience. The first wild stork chicks fledged at Knepp in 2020, four years after the birds arrived. They were the first wild white storks raised in Britain for centuries.

Since then the colony has grown. Knepp reports that in 2025 there were 19 active nests and 45 chicks fledged. The White Stork Project tracks GPS tagged birds on an interactive flight map, following them on migration from their English nesting sites to wintering grounds in continental Europe and as far as Morocco. In 2025 the project joined the European Stork Villages Network, and Knepp and the nearby village of Storrington were named the United Kingdom's only "Stork Village."

For people in Sussex, storks have gone from historical curiosity to a familiar sight on the skyline in less than ten years.

Why Willington

The Derbyshire project is part of a wider hope that storks will spread from their southern foothold and form new colonies across England. Willington Wetlands was chosen because it already offers much of what storks need.

The reserve sits beside the River Trent and has a mix of reedbeds, wet grassland and open pools, the kind of landscape that provides both food and nesting habitat. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust notes that wild storks were seen flying over Willington in 2024 and nearby in 2025, but none stayed to breed.

There is another reason the site is special. Willington Wetlands is also home to Derbyshire's first beavers in more than 800 years. Beavers are among nature's great engineers. By building dams and digging channels, they slow the flow of water, create pools and wet grassland, and expand reedbeds. The habitat they shape is exactly the kind that storks like to feed in.

The Trust describes the storks as "wetland ambassadors" that will help it "unlock the support needed to restore wilder wetland habitats." A thriving wetland benefits far more

than storks. The Trust lists amphibians, wading birds, willow tits, grasshopper warblers and small mammals among the species that should gain from the restoration.

Beavers, the stork's unlikely allies

The pairing of storks and beavers at Willington is more than a coincidence of location. It reflects one of the central ideas of modern rewilding: that restoring one species can open the door for others.

Beavers were hunted to extinction in Britain centuries ago for their fur, their meat and a secretion used in medicine and perfume. Over recent decades they have begun to return, first in trial projects and enclosures and then, in some areas, in the wild. Wherever they settle, the landscape changes. Their dams hold water back after rain, which can reduce flooding downstream. The pools behind them become rich habitat for insects, amphibians and fish. Dead wood and flooded margins attract birds.

For a stork, which wades slowly through shallow water and wet grass hunting frogs and insects, a beaver shaped wetland is close to ideal. In that sense the beavers of Willington have been preparing the ground for the storks without knowing it. One returning species has made room for another.

The long journey south

Part of what makes the white stork remarkable is its migration. Most white storks that breed in Western Europe spend the winter far to the south, in Iberia or Africa, and return each spring to breed.

Storks are heavy birds, and they travel by soaring rather than by constant flapping. They ride rising columns of warm air, called thermals, spiralling upwards and then gliding long distances before finding the next thermal. Because thermals form over land rather than water, storks generally avoid long sea crossings. Birds from Western Europe tend to funnel through Spain and cross into Africa at the narrow Strait of Gibraltar.

The GPS tracking carried out by the White Stork Project has shown English storks making exactly these journeys, travelling through continental Europe and in some cases reaching Morocco. A bird that hatched in a Sussex oak can, a few months later, be feeding in a North African field, and then find its way back. If storks settle and breed in Derbyshire, their chicks will one day make the same journey from the banks of the Trent.

Why wetlands matter

The storks may be the headline, but the real story at Willington is the wetland itself.

Wetlands are among the most valuable habitats on earth, and among the most heavily lost. Over centuries, Britain drained marshes, straightened rivers and turned wet meadows into farmland. The cost of that loss is now better understood. Healthy wetlands store water and release it slowly, which helps reduce flooding. They filter pollutants from rivers. Many store carbon in their soils. And they support an extraordinary range of wildlife, from dragonflies and frogs to wading birds and otters.

Restoring wetlands is therefore not only about bringing back a charismatic bird. It is about rebuilding a working landscape that serves people as well as wildlife. When Derbyshire Wildlife Trust describes its storks as "wetland ambassadors," that is what it means: the storks draw attention and support to a habitat whose benefits reach far beyond them.

The partners

The storks at Willington come from Celtic Rewilding, a captive breeding specialist in neighbouring Staffordshire, which also helped design the enclosure; its ecologists assessed the site's suitability and provide training and advice, including on supplementary feeding. A specialist local contractor built the enclosure under method statements approved by the Trust's ecologists.

The project has been funded with more than £300,000 from the Veolia Environmental Trust through the Landfill Communities Fund, a scheme that directs a share of landfill tax towards community and environmental projects. There is a pleasing symmetry there: money linked to waste, used to bring back a bird that disappeared when people stopped making space for nature.

Harvey Tweats, director of Celtic Rewilding, said: "This project offers a rare opportunity to facilitate the return of a key missing species."

A project people can join

What makes this project hopeful is not only the birds, but the people around them.

Volunteers feed and check the storks every day. They also help with drone flying, camera trap checks, a tree nursery and habitat work parties. The Trust has planned community events throughout the project year, and a digital platform so that people who cannot visit can follow the storks and share sightings.

The reserve is always open. A bridleway leads to viewing platforms where the enclosure can be seen from a distance, and one of the hides may offer a view.

That openness matters. Conservation projects succeed in the long run when local people feel a sense of ownership. A child who watches a stork land on a nest near their home, or who helps plant trees on a volunteer day, is more likely to grow up caring about wetlands, rivers and the wildlife that depends on them.

The bird that brings good news

Storks have carried symbolic weight in Europe for a very long time. Folklore across much of the continent associated them with good fortune, spring and new life. The idea of the stork delivering babies became so widespread that it still appears on greeting cards today, and the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen wrote a tale called *The Storks* in the nineteenth century.

In many European towns and villages, a stork nest on a roof was considered a blessing on the household. Storks were protected by custom long before they were protected by law.

There is something fitting, then, about a stork being the face of a project about recovery. If any bird has been asked to carry good news through human history, it is this one.

A change in how Britain sees its land

The storks at Knepp arrived on an estate that had itself been transformed. Its owners, Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree, began turning the struggling farm over to nature in the early 2000s, letting fields scrub over and introducing free roaming cattle, pigs, ponies and deer to shape the landscape. Isabella Tree's 2018 book *Wilding* told that story and helped bring the idea of rewilding to a wide British audience.

At the time, the approach was controversial. Letting productive farmland "go wild" struck many neighbours as wasteful or even irresponsible. Two decades later, Knepp has become one of the most studied nature recovery sites in Britain, home to rare species that had been absent for generations, including the storks.

The spread of the stork project from Sussex to Derbyshire reflects how far public attitudes have shifted. Wildlife trusts, landowners and funders are now actively looking for ways to restore lost species and habitats. What was once a fringe idea has become part of mainstream conservation, and the return of a bird that has been missing for six centuries is one of its most visible symbols.

The wider recovery

The return of storks to Britain is part of a broader European story.

During the twentieth century, white storks declined sharply in parts of Western Europe because of wetland drainage, pesticides, power lines and changes in farming. In several countries, populations fell to a handful of pairs. Conservationists responded with protection, habitat restoration and reintroduction programs, and many of those populations have since recovered. Storks are now a common sight again in parts of the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Germany and Spain.

Britain, as an island that lost its storks much earlier, has been a latecomer. But the pattern is the same. Where wetlands are restored and birds are given a safe start, storks can and do come back.

The same is true for other species. The beavers at Willington are part of a wider return of beavers to British rivers. Ospreys, red kites, white tailed eagles and cranes have all returned or been reintroduced to parts of Britain over the past several decades after long absences. Each return has depended on two things: a species able to recover, and people willing to give it room.

What this is, and what it is not

It is important to be clear about what has happened in Derbyshire.

The storks at Willington are in an enclosure. They are not yet a wild breeding population. The project's current phase runs for twelve months, and its stated aim is to establish a healthy breeding group and, over time, a self sustaining population, potentially by releasing chicks and attracting wild storks to settle and breed.

That will take years, and there is no guarantee. Storks are long lived birds that may not breed until they are several years old. Wild birds may or may not choose to stay. The Sussex experience shows that patience is needed: it was four years from the first storks arriving at Knepp to the first wild chicks fledging.

But the direction is right. A species that disappeared from the Midlands more than six centuries ago now has a home there again, and a community of people working to help it stay.

A reflection

I find stories like this especially hopeful because they reverse the usual direction of environmental news.

Much of what we hear about nature is about loss: species declining, habitats shrinking, warnings growing louder. Those warnings are real and important. But if we only ever hear about loss, it is easy to conclude that loss is inevitable, and that nothing we do can change it.

The storks of Willington say otherwise. They show that what was lost can sometimes be restored, and that restoration often begins with something quite modest: a wetland reserve, a few hundred thousand pounds, a team of volunteers, and the willingness to wait.

Perhaps the deepest lesson is about time. The storks left Britain six centuries ago. The project to bring them back to Sussex took four years to produce its first chick. The Derbyshire project is in its first year. People who work on nature recovery have to think in decades, and sometimes they plant trees whose shade they will never sit in. That kind of patience is itself a form of hope.

How readers can help

For readers who would like to support nature recovery, wherever they live, the Willington project suggests some simple starting points:

- **Support your local wildlife trust or conservation group.** Projects like this depend on members, donors and volunteers.
- **Volunteer.** Feeding birds, checking cameras, planting trees and joining habitat work parties are all tasks that rely on ordinary people giving their time.
- **Report sightings.** Many recovery projects, including this one, use public records of wildlife to track how species are spreading.
- **Visit respectfully.** Seeing wildlife in person builds support for its protection, but keeping a distance and following site guidance protects the animals.

Lessons for anyone working on recovery

1. **Restore the habitat first.** Storks returned to Willington because the wetland was already being restored, with help from beavers. Bring back the conditions and wildlife can follow.

2. **Build on proven success.** The Derbyshire project draws on a decade of experience in Sussex. Good ideas spread when they are shown to work.
3. **Involve the community.** Volunteers, events and a digital platform give local people a stake in the project's success.
4. **Be honest about timescales.** Recovery takes years. Clear, modest milestones help sustain support.
5. **Use flagship species wisely.** A charismatic bird can draw attention and funding to a whole ecosystem, benefiting many less visible species.

Closing

Sometime in the coming years, if all goes well, a pair of white storks will build a nest of sticks somewhere above the River Trent and raise chicks that will one day fly south to Africa and return. When that happens, it will be the first time in more than six hundred years that the Midlands has heard the clatter of storks' bills on a nest of their own.

There is something quietly democratic about that image. Storks do not nest only in nature reserves. Across Europe they build on church towers, rooftops, chimneys and telegraph poles, in the middle of villages and towns, living alongside people rather than apart from them. If the Midlands project succeeds, the reward will not belong only to conservationists. It will belong to every family that looks up one spring morning and sees a stork standing on a nest above their street.

The people of Derbyshire have started the work. The storks, as they always have, will decide the rest.

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Author: Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Publisher: Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition: 2, August 2026

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The Hope Dispatch is published on LinkedIn by Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu. This edition collects the pieces in the order they were first published, with their original images.