

Enabling Rural Communities to Build Equality in India

Project Summary:

This project will enable the production and sale of scarves made by women in Self-Help Groups in Kanchipuram, India in order to raise funds for RIDE, a preexisting locally run community building organization. RIDE provides extensive programs for economic self-sufficiency and the reduction of child labor for nearly 200 rural villages.

Brief Background

UNICEF reports that 42% of the population lives below the poverty line. This is largely due to gender inequality, low education levels, and the lingering repercussions of the caste system, which limit social mobility. Traditional gender roles often restrict women to unpaid work in the domestic sphere and are especially salient among lower classes, presenting an additional barrier to economic prosperity.¹ Exclusion of women from the workforce has also led to the rise of child labor as an alternative to boosting family income. With children working rather than attending school, human capital levels stagnate. According to UNICEF, 59% of boys and 49% of girls attend secondary school. The development of human capital is crucial for a community to uplift itself out of poverty and social inequality.

The Rural Institute for Development Education

Issues of poverty and social inequality are prevalent in the district of Kanchipuram located in Tamil Nadu, India. Kanchipuram is known for its silk weaving industry and produces specialty saris with materials and techniques unique to the region. Many children are employed in the silk weaving industry. RIDE serves as a child labor watchdog by holding businesses in the region accountable for illegally employing children. Moreover, RIDE provides resources such as Self-Help Groups for women to become economically self-sufficient (rather than dependent on their children for income) as well as Bridge Schools to help children transition from laborers to students. Additional programs include entrepreneurship, vocational skills training, and micro-loans (open to both men and women.) In the Bridge Schools, the children are eased into schooling by dedicated staff and are prepared for entrance into public schools, thereby encouraging them to break the cycle of poverty and social stratification by developing their own human capital. Of the approximately 300 children who enroll in Bridge Schools annually, 95% complete the program and enroll in public school, and 90% are still in school after one year. In 1997, it was measured that 40,000 children were working in the district of Kanchipuram. With the work the Rural Institute for Development Education (RIDE), that number was reduced to 4,000 by 2007.² RIDE reaches people in almost 200 rural villages and is run primarily by women, who represent almost 90% of the full-time staff.

Project Overview

With the Davis Projects for Peace grant money, we would expand our business partnership with RIDE to empower the women in Kanchipuram to uplift their communities. We would employ women in the Self-Help Groups to create scarves in the style of the saris they already produce. We would then sell the scarves in the United States. We would purchase the scarves at a generous price from the women and use one third of the profits to cover business expenses, one third to develop and grow the project, and one third to fund RIDE programs such as Bridge Schools. With this business model, we would accomplish several things. We would create employment opportunities for women, utilize preexisting local artisanal skills in an environmentally conscious way, and support programs of RIDE economically and by raising awareness of the organization through our product.

Implementation

One of the members of our team has already built a relationship with the founder of the organization beginning when she visited RIDE, toured its classrooms, and met some of the women involved in the Self-Help Groups four years ago. She has been in correspondence with the founder of the organization, who has helped women in the Self-Help Groups begin production of 15 sample scarves, which the team expects to arrive in the mail within the month of February. Upon request, the founder has also provided narratives explaining the background of the women making the scarves, which the team has adapted to be printed on the scarf labels. These stories will build a connection between the purchasers of the scarves and the women who made them, making them marketable products and raising social consciousness.

The scarves would be highly marketable. The members of the team have been testing the market with scarves made from similar Indian-style fabric and have gotten multiple requests to purchase similar scarves each time they wore them. Additionally, there is currently an intern working for RIDE (Emma) who has a background in fashion and is helping to get the project off the ground and ensuring the scarves are up to western standards.

A note from Emma, the intern at RIDE:

¹ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40229787>

² <http://www.rideindia.org/about-ride/>

“In order for the project to get off the ground we need to ensure that we have the funds to pay an ongoing wage to the ladies involved in the project. We also need the funds upfront to pay for materials, postage and packaging, printing etc. We want to be able to offer job security to these women, as such will pay upfront for the work that they do. For this reason we are only starting with a few women, but if we had the funds secured we would be able to grow the project and roll it out at a much faster rate. We foresee that this project could provide 100 + women with employment. These women would have the chance to work either at home or in the RIDE production centre which we are currently setting up at the RIDE centre in Little Kanchipuram. We also see this doubling up as a training centre where the women not only work but develop new skills. As my time with RIDE is limited, I will also nurture a habit of knowledge share whereby the next volunteers who come from fashion backgrounds give input into products/development etc, train women in international market/trends, share skills etc.”

The team has been investigating opportunities to sell the scarves and has several networks within which to begin the sales, as well as ideas for expansion. We will employ the Toms Shoes business model of establishing sales representatives on college and high school campuses throughout the country, building a market through person-to-person contact. The team estimates the ability to sell 500 scarves by reaching out to contacts in this manner. To begin, the team will sell scarves to friends at college, and then friends and family in Seattle, drawing on contacts from the team’s respective networks. The team will enlist the help of friends in the National Leadership Council (NLC), from which Olivia graduated. There are over 100 highly motivated teens in this program, several of whom have already expressed an interest in helping with sales. The teens are from across the country, and have their own networks of friends and church communities to whom they may sell the scarves. The team also has friends from high school who have expressed interest in helping with this project by selling scarves in their respective college communities. Olivia has sold 100 tote bags to raise money for RIDE by selling primarily at a conference for NLC, so the idea has already been presented within this community and with additional effort reaching out to new contacts and adding Natacha’s friends, family, and personal connections, as well as utilizing the wide reach of the teens in NLC and friends in college, the team is confident in the feasibility of selling 500 scarves afforded by Davis grant money. Profits from these initial sales will enable the expansion of the project including the commission of additional scarves.

Once the market has been established through sales to preexisting contacts and the product has been finalized, the team will expand the project by holding benefit concerts this summer and by branching out to the retail sector. The team has connections with several musical groups and musicians in Seattle, including the singer Kimya Dawson, bands Hey! Marseilles and Land of Pines, local jazz group Tessa and Jay Frost, chamber music series Simple Measures, and potentially more. We will arrange concerts to promote the purchase of scarves and donations to the project. We have several mentor figures with experience in social entrepreneurship who have connections to boutiques in Maine and Washington State, including both Fabric of Life and Marigold near Seattle, WA, and Ten Thousand Villages in Portland, ME, as well as coffee shops like Café Ladro and Oh! Chocolate. Olivia also has a personal connection with a woman who makes wholesale purchase decisions at Nordstrom, and as the project becomes stable, that is a potential larger retail opportunity to pursue.

The team will visit RIDE this summer and spend time working with the organization to better take into account the regional needs and to assure all aspects of the project are having a positive impact. Olivia has family living in India who can help with understanding regional business practices and can help address any issues that come up. They are also willing to visit the organization while she and Natacha are in Seattle if the need arises.

Sustainability and Exit Strategy

The summer project would be completed with an estimate of about \$3300 donated to RIDE. The remainder of the revenue would be put towards continuing to raise money for RIDE with scarf sales. The business model allows the project to be entirely self-sustaining. With the expansion of the project, our team would stay true to the ethos of the Peace Project grant, holding the goal of social justice at the heart of all aspects of business. Any future decisions would be centered around the questions of whether the outcome is the most compassionate, well thought out, socially, environmentally, and culturally considerate. If the team were to move on from the project at some point, they would either find replacements to continue the work or donate all remaining business assets to RIDE.

About Us

Olivia Krishnaswami and Natacha Danon both grew up in Seattle, Washington and are now students at Bates College. In her previous social entrepreneurship project, Olivia raised \$1000 for RIDE by making and selling canvas bags. She also raised about \$3500 for the National Leadership Council for a capstone project in high school. She is now the Bates Annual Fund student intern. She is a Politics and Women and Gender Studies double major, and has dedicated herself to the fight for human rights through clubs, projects, and volunteer efforts in which she has participated over the years. Olivia has Indian heritage, and her grandfather grew up near where RIDE is based. Natacha is an anticipated Politics and/or Anthropology major at Bates College and is committed to human rights. She believes she would be an effective team member due to her unwavering commitment to human rights as well as her enduring endeavor to understand and appreciate the narratives of all people, the seeds of which were planted the day she was born to a multicultural family (her father is a French immigrant and her mother is second-generation Danish). She would provide aesthetic guidance for the scarves that would appeal to an American market and has also established contacts in Seattle with local stores that have volunteered to sell the scarves.