

Preliminary Report and Documentation for the “Strengthening Livelihoods of Trafficking Prone Communities” Project

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“The Developmental Onion”

There is an antiquated analogy used in anthropological discourse to describe the process of understanding culture. Picture someone peeling away the layers of an onion. In the same way, we understand culture, or the way people go about their daily lives, by peeling away the various layers of meaning they attach to whatever they do. What does it mean for someone to be a member of a community? What does it mean for a father or mother to pass on a skill to his or her child? What does social or economic mobility mean to someone?

While uncovering layers of meaning associated with people’s lives is an important anthropological exercise, development interventions can use the same analogy in reverse. Instead of peeling away layers of the onion, development initiatives must also be concerned with adding layers to the onion. One can say that while anthropology deconstructs meaning, development work must construct it. In development projects, standard inputs may include funding, expertise, infrastructure, networking and linkages, etc. But what must also be added is new meanings and concepts to people’s lives and perceptions.

Take, for example, the following simple question: What does learning a new skill mean? The obvious answer is that by learning a new skill I will have broadened my knowledge base. But its meaning can go much deeper, because acquiring a new skill means I now have something with proprietary value. Ownership of a skill means that I have the capacity to benefit from it. The benefits of owning a skill may come in many forms, such as social and economic mobility, widening of my social network, having a sense of pride in my skilled work, pursuing higher level skills or engaging with new ones. As the layers of meaning are added there is a better understanding of the importance of learning a new skill.

Constructing Meaning for Beneficiaries in Tanakpur

Development Alternatives’ (DA) livelihood approach to preventing trafficking along the border areas of India and Nepal is an experiment in not only capacity building, but also in giving people, and specifically women, the opportunity and know-how to gain a wider worldview. Over the past three months the Integrated Resource Centre (IRC) in Tanakpur, Uttaranchal, has developed into a place where over 100 women regularly come to learn one of the following skills: zardozi, sewing, food processing, or computer literacy. According to IRC trainers, local NGO representatives, DA’s project managers and consultants, some of the changes over the past three months include:

- Increase in infrastructural input, such as sewing machines and wooden frames for zardozi work.
- Better spatial organization of the IRC.
- Increase in the number of women participating in the centre.
- More awareness among local NGO representatives about the holistic process of livelihood generation.
- Quick-paced learning of skills by women resulting in better quality and diverse products, such as handbags, cushion covers, and a variety of processed foods (achaar and jam).
- Greater sense of ownership among women and pride in their work.
- More understanding among trainers, NGO workers and women participants about the business and marketing implications of the project.

All of the above changes that were observed contribute to the construction of meaning, which leads to widening perspectives and a broader world-view for all beneficiaries.

Conversations with Dr. V.P. Balodi, Director, Participatory Action Research for Advancement and Justice (PARAAJ)

PARAAJ is an Uttaranchal based NGO that has been partnering with DA on the livelihoods generation for trafficking prone communities project. I spoke with Dr. Balodi on numerous occasions and asked him how he felt the project was progressing. He recounted that at first there was a lack of interest amongst women. They knew that government interventions in the region had given honorariums for attending trainings, whereas DA's project provided training without honorariums. However, as the trainings progressed and skill bases increased, more and more women came to the centre and since then interest in the programme has risen to the point where it is now difficult to admit new women for training. Dr. Balodi also noticed that ownership by women beneficiaries also increased. They have started to think in terms of "their company".

Dr. Balodi also told me that before getting involved with this project PARAAJ was only involved in trainings. Once training sessions were finished and people acquired a skill, there would be no follow through and these beneficiaries would be sent back to find whatever work they could. Now through affiliation with DA's project, they have learned about the holistic process of livelihood generation, which involves knowledge about markets, basic business and organizational acumen, and lots of listening to the needs of beneficiaries.

The interest taken by those who come to the centre is especially apparent when hearing the stories of women who travel for hours every day to reach the IRC. After speaking with numerous women who leave their homes at 6:00 am to reach the IRC at 9:00 am, the impression was that these women genuinely want to be at the centre. Some of the women living in remote villages must walk on rough ground, cross two rivers and a forest in

order to reach the IRC in Tanakpur. These women recounted that during the rainy season these paths are virtually impossible to cross due to flooding, and in the dry season they encounter wild animals along the way. Once the trainings are finished in the late afternoons, the women return home mostly in the dark. Even though these routes have become second nature to them, these women show dedication by travelling over three hours everyday to be a part of the trainings. These women seemed to have a sense of pride in coming to the centre, especially when other women from their villages would ask them where they are going – at first tauntingly, and then enviously.

Anju Devi Budha, Zardozi Trainee

Anju lives in a village in Nepal. Before becoming a trainee at the Integrated Resource Centre she was a part-time agricultural worker in the neighbouring villages. For seven years she has been a single mother raising two children. Her husband left her one day to go to Delhi and never came back. He does not send any money. She found out about the IRC when a few local NGO workers came to her village and informed people about the new trainings. Now, in order to reach the IRC she travels by cycle to the India-Nepal border and then takes a bus to reach the centre.

Sain Begum (?), Zardozi Craftsperson

Sain Begum had never been to the IRC. She knew about the centre because many of the people from her settlement, which is located outside Tanakpur, are beneficiaries. When a group from DA and PARAAJ went to visit the settlement (name?), and in particular to visit the Zardozi trainer, Sain Begum came round and listened to the conversation. A friend of hers, who is a trainee in the Food Processing Unit, told us that Sain Begum is well trained in zardozi. When asked why she wasn't a participant in the centre, she said that her husband and family would not let her go. The next day, when all the women were working in the centre, Sain Begum was also there sitting with the other zardozi trainees. When asked how she was able to come today, she said that her husband was away for a few weeks, and now she had the opportunity to come to the centre.

Many of the women who have been coming to the centre say they feel a greater sense of ownership towards the centre (“the company”) and the products they make. When asked what was the most beneficial aspect of the IRC, many women said it was the skills they learned. They felt that now they had a unique and specialized knowledge which they could use to further their own lives. In conversations with the women, many said that “only if the work is good, then we can go further”. Perhaps it was the trainers who were the most impressed by the progress of the women trainees. The trainers were given a time period of three months to teach the women the necessary skills to be able to produce for different kinds of markets. With the regular help of consultants with in-depth knowledge

of textile design and food processing, knowledge about the final products, the process of making these products, and about market demand seems to have steadily increased among the beneficiaries.

Zaffar, Zardozi Trainer

Zaffar and his wife Guddi live in a settlement on the outskirts of Tanakpur. Both have been practicing zardozi since they were children and now they have passed down the skill to their children. Most of Zaffar's house is dominated by a large wooden frame, which is used for zardozi work. For Zaffar and his family, zardozi is the main source of livelihood. They make saris and other garments for local markets as well as supply markets in Delhi. Zaffar says that the demand for zardozi is so high that he is finding it difficult to meet demand.

When Zaffar was approached by DA to become a zardozi trainer at the IRC he was hesitant. Having learned the craft over many years, Zaffar was not convinced that the trainees would be able to produce anything worthwhile in three months. After much convincing, he agreed to become a trainer. Zaffar now concedes that in the past three months, since the IRC was established, the trainees have far exceeded his expectations.

Progress of work in sewing and zardozi

First sample:



Second sample:



Third sample:



Fourth sample:



Fifth sample:



Sixth sample:



In the Food Processing Unit, the women trainees received training in not only how to make the products, but also in hygienic practices and final packaging. The women themselves noted the improvement of the products due to changes in hygiene. The women in this unit have also taken up an entrepreneurial spirit. Because achar (pickles) and jams are common household items, the women are buying from the centre and then selling these items in their communities for a small profit. Many of the women in this unit recounted that before joining the IRC's training scheme they had completed a one month training in durrie (rug) making, which was given by a local NGO. However, they realized the training was not effective because there was no follow-through, in terms of how they could market their new skills. One woman said she was simply sent back home and told to find her own work. The women in the group said they were happy with the training they received at the IRC, but they now realize there is need for more marketing knowledge. Some of the other problems they addressed were:

- Need for new and more efficient machines, because presently it takes a lot of time to make the final product.
- Need for better packaging materials.
- Need for better access to raw materials.

- Problems with space and storage.
- Problems with water, because they said the same water source is being used for too many purposes.

Another marked change, which was noted by DA Project Managers and local NGO workers who have been closely associated with the IRC, was the difference in behaviour of many women trainees. The women have been more open to learning about the further complexities of starting an enterprise, and they have become more extraverted in voicing their opinions and grievances. The step towards creating a meaningful business enterprise among the woman has proven to be an intensive process. Hours of explaining business and marketing concepts to all beneficiaries (local NGO workers, trainers and trainees) has become an essential exercise in constructing a wider know-how and world-view, so that everyone sees the IRC not as a one-off training scheme, but as a marketable, self-sustaining company.

Steps Forward

The novel approach that DA has taken to eradicate trafficking through livelihood generation has proven, at an early stage, to be a successful experiment. Local NGO workers, trainers and trainees have all benefited from the wide array of expertise brought into this project, and attitudes towards livelihood and income generation have changed among these beneficiaries. However, when such a meaningful project has impacted so many stakeholders, it becomes important to move the project forward in the most efficient manner.

While further trainings are necessary in order to diversify the range and quality of the products, the more conceptual (as opposed to practical) aspects of learning about a business must also be learned. Training in skill-building should also be accompanied with organizational training and basic business/marketing concepts. Many of these “steps forward” were discussed among DA Project Managers and local NGO workers and trainers. Discussion and training for all beneficiaries on the topics of standardization and quality control are also crucial. In these matters, it is important to expose all beneficiaries to the levels of quality control that exist in companies that operate locally, nationally and globally.

For the benefit and conceptual understanding of the trainees (who will eventually become the main stakeholders of the company), simple diagrams and organizational flow-charts should be designed and displayed at the IRC. These diagrams should clarify the division of labour among the three main units (Food Processing, Zardozi, and Sewing), but also show how everyone’s individual work is interconnected to the overall growth of the company. As agreed in group discussions, each unit will develop a system so that information flow is systematic and efficient, i.e. each unit will assign a few people to the role of supervisors, through whom all information will be channelled.