

Expressions in Exile Bangladesh



“I do this because I would like to be self-reliant. I would also like to learn computing and English”.

- Siang Khin Par

LOCATION

Bangladesh

DURATION

Ongoing

IMPLEMENTING PARTNER

None

DONOR

Not applicable

BUDGET

US \$300

Given by UNHCR for the purchase of raw materials, and to invest in language and skills training

OVERVIEW

Refugees are not formally allowed to work in Bangladesh, however income generating activities undertaken at home, and service provision in the informal sector, are areas where refugees are allowed to work. Working in these areas increase their self-reliance.

UNHCR is working in partnership with the private sector and NGOs to help refugees develop their skills and ensure that their products are able to be sold. Expressions in Exile is the brand name for the products that were initially started by five refugee women from the Chin State of Myanmar. The women were, until March 2009, largely reliant on UNHCR’s assistance and used to make traditional Chin blankets for their own use. Through partnerships, the refugees have improved the design, quality and access of their products and are now making shawls, scarves, ponchos, baby blankets, picnic blankets, bed spreads and bags. Demand for Expressions in Exile products has exceeded expectations and UNHCR is, together with partners, helping the women to assess the viability of expanding their production. In the near future it is anticipated that more refugees could get involved.

AIM OF PROJECT

There was increased need to support all refugees in their self-reliance efforts. Moreover, there was a protection imperative to empower women economically by improving their skills.

- To build partnerships between refugees and NGOs and private enterprise that are sustainable and that do not require UNHCR’s intervention in the long run.
- To encourage refugees who are self-reliant to extend support to other refugees and other members of their community, including Bangladeshis who are extremely vulnerable or who need to also become self-reliant.

PROJECT OUTPUTS/RESULTS

The refugee women are now supplying their products to outlets of two successful businesses in Dhaka which specialize in handicrafts. Since its inception in mid-2009, Expressions in Exile has made a net profit of about US \$700. Most sales were realized during the British High Commission Fair, and through supply orders from a fair trade organization, Hathay Bunano ps1 and Jattrra, a retail outlet. The women have outstanding supply orders with Jattrra and DriVen Partnerships2 (a social enterprise).

Interest in their products has also been expressed by several overseas-based businesses, and the women are preparing for more Trade Fairs later in the year. The project has empowered them, it provides a forum for peer interactions and support, and is an informal community protection network (CPN).

The women involved in the project meet and share information, skills, experience and problems. They are able to address important issues collectively, and contribute to the socio-economic needs of their families/communities. For their start-up costs, they borrowed from UNHCR US \$250 with the understanding that they will repay it by investing in language training for themselves and other refugees. Moreover, they are required to build the skills of fellow refugees, not least to meet increased demand and to empower them.

IMPACTS

While it may be early to identify the larger impacts of this project, the women's confidence and self-esteem has increased. Earning money and learning business skills have decreased the dependence on UNHCR as partnerships are being built. They have invested some of the proceeds from their sales in banana farming, thereby involving and improving the situation of 33 Chin refugees. DriVen Partnerships, a social enterprise in Bangladesh, is undertaking an assessment mission with UNHCR to determine whether there is scope for further partnership with Expressions in Exile.

LESSONS LEARNED

This project reiterates the fact that refugees possess important social capital. Expressions in Exile is an adaptation of traditional products for a modern market – done through design, (colour combinations, sizing of product, materials used) marketability and independent investment. From the same loom and materials the women have been able to create shawls, scarves, ponchos, baby blankets, picnic blankets, bed spreads and bags.

- **Viable employment opportunities** that are not too alien to refugees have the potential of ensuring refugees are self-reliant more rapidly, thereby ensuring a more successful phase-out of cash grants and subsistence allowances. While this project has had a measure of success, there are challenges with some other refugees who are reluctant to engage in initiatives and partnerships for their self-reliance.
- **Balance** must be found between providing guidance and support, and allowing the women to run their project independent of UNHCR. Care has been taken to ensure that UNHCR is not too involved. Ultimately the aim is for UNHCR to withdraw from facilitating partnership and allow the women to engage with the industry on their own.
- Although market demand is high, attention to quality and business practices will help to ensure the longevity of the project. Care has been taken not to overwhelm the women.
- **Product branding** is very important. The name Expressions in Exile was decided upon as it was deemed positive, generally had market appeal, and allowed for the inclusion of all refugees even beyond Bangladesh.
- It is important to **apply principles of business** by investing resources in the formulation of a sound business plan, doing market research, seeking advice from experts, and learning appropriate management skills where business is the key self-reliance strategy. UNHCR does not have this expertise and refugees benefit from the support of others that do. In the case of Bangladesh there are organizations that are eager to support, and be associated with UNHCR and refugees.
- The **consumer market is keen to support businesses** operating to the principles of fair trade. There is also support for initiatives by special groups such as refugees.
- The **inclusion of non-refugees** from the communities, at least in benefiting from profits to build their skills is important to ensure that a project is sustainable and that it does not cause disharmony within communities that are sometimes facing similar socio-economic problems.