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Ramsey Ford and Kate Hanisian are cofounders of Design Impact, a non-profit organization that partners professional designers with community organizations in India for long-term economic and community development. They have worked in India for the past two years but have permanent residence in Cincinnati.

Embedding Design within an Indian Nonprofit

A LIFE-CHANGING OPPORTUNITY

In the fall of 2008, we took a chance and presented an idea to the executives at Kaleidoscope, a product design firm headquartered in Cincinnati. For the past year, we had been exploring the potential for design and grassroots nonprofits to work together to address some of society's most pressing needs. While examples of this type of collaboration existed, such as Design without Borders (Norway) or MIT's D-Lab, we saw the need for further exploration into alternative models. We presented Kaleidoscope with an opportunity: Join us in creating an international nonprofit that uses design to identify and cultivate community-owned ideas for social and economic development.

Remarkably, Kaleidoscope agreed to help get our nonprofit, Design Impact, off the ground, leveraging their core strengths into positive social impact. Over the next year, we defined our mission and structure, chose a location and partner, and prepared to leave the comfort of our community. By September 2009 we had stored or sold all of our belongings and arrived in a village in southern India to begin work.

Design Impact's approach to design for low-income communities focuses on a gap we have perceived in current practice. Most designers working on issues affecting low-income communities stress the need for a participatory process (often referred to as a user-centered approach), which involves all stakeholders—such as users, manufacturers and implementers—in the process of design. When competently applied, it allows for the creation of highly appropriate and useful objects and services. To achieve participation from multiple stakeholders, the design team usually makes visits into the target community throughout the project, each lasting anywhere from a day to a few weeks. While this approach can harness the feedback of the community, it

does not, as currently practiced, empower the community to have ownership of the process or results. **Even when designers work in communities for a number of weeks, they often return to the comfort of their studios to refine the designs. These short visits, and the removal of work from the target community, bar the community from ownership over the process and creates a space between the designer and the users.** Not only does this space impede community ownership, it also makes it more difficult to design a truly appropriate solution. This existing scenario of design-led development forced us to ask, What if you actually embed the design process in a low-income community? How would that change the process, affect the results and scope, and even impact the capacity of the community itself?

Our vision was not just based on a whim. Best practice in community organizing and economic development supports the idea that local ownership of the process is essential for long-term sustainability and is an important indicator for success. David Korten, a development expert and former



professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Business, suggests that sustained economic development is reliant on the creation of local problem-solving capacity and emphasizes a participatory approach to projects. This sentiment is also echoed by the renowned entrepreneur and philanthropist George Soros, who has written that local ownership of programs as vital to the economic development of impoverished communities.

To align design with the best practice of other professions working for economic development in low-income communities, we decided to embed ourselves and the design process for an extended period with a grassroots community organization. We didn't know where this experiment of ours would net out or how long we would stay in the community, but we set aside two years to test this method. We have now completed a nearly two-year pilot project and are in the process of seeing two projects through to implementation.

Embedding Design in Community

We chose the Organization of Development, Action, and Maintenance (ODAM) in Tamil Nadu, India, as our partner for the pilot project. India is home to a third of the world's impoverished people, and the drought-prone rural areas of Tamil Nadu provided a context that had reasonable access to infrastructure while also immersing us in a resource-poor community. We selected ODA M because it has over 15 years of experience in the region, working to organize laborers and women around financial, educational and agricultural initiatives. In addition, it is well respected and is staffed by members of the community it serves.

Our work with ODA M focused on two projects, both of which were based on existing organizational directives and supported by their staff. We intentionally chose projects that ODA M had already identified in order to ensure its buy-in

and organizational ownership. However, both projects were in their infancy stages and needed a great deal of work before they would be ready for implementation. The first project was a charcoal briquette cooking fuel for low-income urban dwellers. The briquette, made from locally-sourced and sustainably harvested charcoal, reduces indoor air pollution when used instead of wood. Our other project used the glycerin by-product of ODA M's small bio-fuel operation to create a fair-trade soap.

In both projects we provided technical support in areas such as consumer research, market analysis, ergonomic analysis, brand development, graphic design, prototype development, user testing, product testing, engineering and business development. All of these activities—a wide range to be sure—were done in close collaboration with staff at ODA M. We relied on Kaleidoscope and other volunteers for specific skills, but ran all decisions, design reviews and strategy sessions through ODA M. For example, when developing a brand for the soap, we worked with ODA M to run a four-hour multifaceted brainstorming session in the native language. Community participants shared scent memories, discussed locally available ingredients and decided on a name. The goals of this activity were to keep the soap's identity in-line with community values, promote ODA M staff as leaders in the process and ensure that the fair-trade soap project would continue to operate without our input.

At the time of writing this article, we are close to realizing major milestones for each project. The briquette project progressed from a rough concept to a fully developed business that is about to go through a small-scale test market in a nearby city. We worked with ODA M to move the soap from an unfinished formula to a branded commodity ready for the Indian and international market; they recently sent the first samples to potential retailers and distributors.

MATERIALS



While we view these two projects as successful applications of an embedded design process in a low-income community, they don't on their own show that the organization internalized the design process and is able to reapply it in the future. However, after working closely with ODAM and discussing how design can help create solutions that attract community participation, the organization created ODAM Rural Crafts, a for-profit subsidiary of their nonprofit. The aim of ODAM Rural Crafts is to design and develop profit-generating products that use locally available resources to benefit the community. The creation of this entity comes directly from Design Impact's involvement with ODAM and will help embed the design process into its ongoing activities.

Fostering Local Ownership

Throughout these last 20 months we have used the embedded design process, which takes place while living and working within the user community. It is defined by a focus on building relationships between designers and community members that encourage community ownership of the process and localization of the results.

The focus on relationship building nurtures a greater understanding of community values, needs and assets. Understanding these on an individual level takes time, so embedding the design process allows

for a more precise understanding of what will work, as well as who can lead or support the initiative. Taking the time to gather this insight also creates time to develop community leaders who can move the project forward in the absence of the designer. If the goal of the project is community or economic development, building confidence, perspective and skills into the community is essential to sustained success. At ODAM, we worked closely with staff members to build new leaders to carry the projects forward. This effort focused on Usha, a young woman with leadership ability who we worked with daily and who is currently managing both the soap and briquette projects.

As we've mentioned, embedding design in a community allows for local ownership of the project. Existing social-design models focus on products or services that can provide a direct quality-of-life improvement for the target population. The nature of these relationships, however, often moves profits away from the community and toward an external organization. Take for example, a company that manufactures solar-powered lights. These lights reduce indoor air pollution from kerosene lamps while providing extended hours of light for study and work. While the lights are well-designed products that address a basic need, the manufacturing occurs in China and the profits from the sales flow out of the community toward the company, which is geographically and economically distant from the users.

This is not to argue that development should only be local. Large international businesses, organizations and governments obviously play a key role in creating infrastructure, directing policy and developing outcomes that benefit low-income communities. However, there is also need for alternative initiatives that promote social change from within the communities themselves. This local capacity building is essential for economic growth and is a powerful tool for closing the growing gap between the poor and wealthy of the world.

When a community-based nonprofit organization owns the product or service, profits from the project flow directly back to the community and expand the local economy. Paul Polak, of International Development Enterprises, supports this idea, stating, “The most direct and cost-effective first step out of poverty is to find ways to help poor people to increase their income. This allows them to make their own choices about which root causes of poverty to address.” Thus, local profits are not only financial but also human and technical. According to the prominent

Indian economist Amartya Sen, “The success of development programs cannot be judged merely in terms of their effects on incomes and outputs, and must, on a basic level focus on the lives people can lead.” He argues that development that focuses only on economic indicators misses the point; development is actually about the capacity to act.

Design Impact believes that the freedom to act—to access education and healthcare, to travel freely, to start a business—can be cultivated from within communities. The embedded design process empowers communities in many forms, from the technical knowledge of using the design process to the confidence that local change is possible to the actual economic or health benefits of the intervention itself. Elango, one of our partners at ODAM, recently told us, “After partnering with Design Impact we now have the ability to use locally available resources to create tools that reduce the burden of the rural poor.” While we are learning every day about how to improve this process, we are encouraged by what we have seen and are excited to humbly continue forward. ■

