

BUSINESS AMONG SOUTH ASIAN REFUGEES

Daniel Batchelder

The first time I visited the main shopping district of a war-torn nation in South Asia, women swarmed around me, carrying small babies and begging for anything I might give them. Every time I got out of my vehicle I would be suddenly surrounded. Weeping mothers, doe-eyed children on their shoulders, were grabbing, pulling, pleading with me for something, anything to help them take care of their families.

Twenty-three years of unrelenting military conflict, widespread human rights abuses, and, more recently, a four-year drought have created devastating humanitarian conditions for many families. Millions of refugees have fled their homelands in the past two decades. Military conflict has forced many to flee to neighboring countries for safety and for food, clothing, and shelter.

These families reportedly have the world's highest infant, child, and maternal mortality rates. They also have the lowest literacy rate and life expectancy and lowest level of food per capita. Twenty-five percent of newborns die before age 5.

We are not members of a relief agency, but the condition of the people is so desperate that we had to do something. Rather than provide direct relief, we looked for ways to stimulate economic and community development projects. While not ignoring the immediate needs of hurting families, we try to find creative solutions that bring hope and are economically sustainable for the future—not just providing a fish, but also teaching them how to fish. These people are like most of us. They would much rather have meaningful jobs than handouts.

One time a group of women approached me as I walked to my vehicle. One by one they showed me official documents certifying that they are wid-

ows. They were asking me for a job in a program we had created, the Widows Quilting Project.

WIDOWS QUILTING PROJECT

The treatment of women in this area has been appalling. A United Nations report estimated there are 30,000 widows in one city alone. These women were forbidden to go out in public by themselves, they were denied an opportunity to go to school, they could not visit a male doctor, and they were not allowed to work outside the home. How were they to feed their children and take care of themselves?

Meanwhile, fifty refugee camps surrounded one city. During the cold winter nights, children died simply because their mothers could not find a way to keep them warm. We began looking for a creative solution that would address both needs. The answer we came up with was the Widows Quilting Project. This is a business employing widows to make quilts for the families living in the camps.

There were several hurdles, of course. First, it was illegal for women to work outside of their homes. Therefore, we decided to bring material to the widows in their homes. A young man had his wife conduct a survey of widows who might want to participate. After an overwhelming 300 eager widows surfaced, we stopped the survey. It became clear that finding workers would not be our problem. A second hurdle was that we needed to find a way to market the quilts. Who would buy them?

The quilts are simple but durable. We deliver fabric, needles, thread, and more than seven pounds of raw cotton to each widow for each quilt. The two pieces of fabric are sewn together and the cotton evenly distributed in between. The “quilting” is all done by hand, with big needles and strong thread creating individual pockets to keep the cotton from shifting. The widows are paid by the piece. One widow set a record of producing seven quilts in one day. She made three times what a manual laborer can make in a day.

At first it was difficult to get orders for these quilts. Four women from Canada, California, Colorado, and Maryland provided the seed money to launch four individual projects employing twenty widows each. Soon we had more quilts than we had places to store them. Then orders began to come in. Individuals, families, businesses, churches, and other organizations started purchasing these quilts and asking us to distribute them to the refugee families who were in need. People were realizing that the same \$5 used to bring relief to a child in a refugee camp also provided a job, dignity, and hope to a widow caring for her own children.

One recent winter, the project provided more than 30,000 day jobs for widows. Orders for 5,000 and 10,000 quilts from aid organizations have enabled this project to grow. At first we worried that we might not be able to meet such large orders in a timely manner. We soon found out, however, that for every widow working for this project, five more were waiting in the wings, hoping for an opportunity to work. This ability to quickly expand the work force has enabled us to keep up with very large orders, even on short notice.

Another hurdle was the seasonal nature of the work. While blankets and quilts were in demand during the winter, the need plunged during the summer. We soon found ourselves with an oversupply of quilts during the summer and little work for the widows. We decided to diversify and are now making the traditional bed mat and pillow set, called a *tow shak*. People use it both as a chair (while sitting cross-legged on the floor, with the pillow as a back rest) and as a bed. *Tow shaks* are in every home. They make a practical gift to a returning refugee family and are much less seasonally affected than quilts. We expect them to provide a more stable form of employment.

Yet another challenge was our response to the wildly fluctuating prices of cotton, needles and thread, and fabric. To hedge ourselves against such price swings, we set aside a few pennies from the sale of each quilt. We use this money to purchase more material to make more quilts. Thus, we measure the value of the project by how many quilts we have in inventory. Today we have more than three times the number of quilts that the initial investment produced.

We want these widows as well as many other families to find meaningful employment that offers a living wage and the dignity and hope that come from productive employment. We are exploring whether we can produce a line of women's clothing as well as other furnishings and accessories to be sold in the West.

CARPET WEAVING

This war-torn nation has experienced hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons. They are not refugees in the official sense because they have not left their country, but they are families on the run just the same. Thousands of these people have poured into neighboring cities to escape the fighting. The unemployment rate in these areas can exceed 80 to 90 percent.

One day I met with a representative of 9,000 families. Hamid was a young man in his early 30s who was quiet, thin, calm, and determined. He had been waiting for several days to meet with me. After listening to the story of how the members of his village had fled the fighting, I asked how we could

help. He said that a little food would be a big help. I replied, “How about a job?” His eyes lit up and a big smile crossed his face.

His people all knew how to make traditional carpets. This was the genesis of our carpet-weaving project. We bought several looms and set them up in our project building. Natural dyed, hand-spun wool was soon being woven into beautiful handmade carpets. These families were becoming self-sufficient again.

Obtaining orders for carpets was difficult at best, however. Traditionally, refugee families prefer to employ younger children because they have small and very quick hands and can out-produce adults. But we try to instill some of the values many in the West have learned concerning child labor. Women also wanted to work, so we placed some of the looms in people’s homes.

Eventually, we found a group that could produce carpets under a fairly predictable contract. Soon we had over fifty people working in the project. However, with recurring unrest, many of the people involved had to flee for their personal safety, including the group we had contracted with to produce carpets.

Today, we are in the rebuilding process. Several families continue to gain meaningful employment from carpet weaving, and recent new orders will allow us to expand this project once again.

We believe that, instead of starting something unfamiliar, you should build a foundation employing traditional skills.

TAILORING PROJECT

I remember the day I was introduced to Najib. I had asked our staff to be looking for entrepreneurs who needed some help getting started. Najib had run a tailoring shop making uniforms for the various militias. His situation mirrored that of many of the residents of the area at the time.

The country’s economy was in a shambles. Most families, including Najib’s, were barely making it. He struggled just to feed his wife and seven children. But we thought he showed much potential.

Najib agreed to set up a tailoring project that would be run according to the business principles we would teach him. We purchased the sewing machines and hired experienced workers. We started making clothes for men, women, and children, and offered them for sale in the local markets. We tried to make better clothes out of durable material.

As with most small business start-ups, the first few months were slow. We coached our staff on how to reach out to the marketplace so potential customers knew who we were and what products we had available. We

set monthly quotas, took samples around to various shops, and did what we could to drum up business. Soon we found a niche making wedding dresses for local brides. Sometimes the bride wears two or three dresses during the extended wedding ceremonies in this culture. Soon we had to hire more workers. Since much of the work included beadwork and embroidering, we hired women to work in their homes. Often one family did the beadwork, another did the embroidering, and someone else did the final stitching back in the shop. At one point, the project was supporting more than 110 families.

Because of the restrictions on women working outside of their homes, visitors to our tailoring shop in 2001 could see a turban-wearing man with a two-foot-long gray beard sewing lovebirds and other frilly things on a pink wedding dress. Everyone was grateful for a chance to work.

In one area, our tailoring project produced five sample school uniforms for boys and five for girls. Ten students from a local elementary school donned these uniforms and visited the Ministry of Education. We hope officials will ask us to produce uniforms for students.

I knew we were beginning to make a difference the day our staff informed me that we were shipping clothes to neighboring countries. People can buy a set of durable clothes for refugee children for \$6. Orders for clothing are coming from the local shops as well.

CHICKEN PROJECT

The nation where we work, with the size and population of Texas, has lost the ability to feed itself. The United Nations reports a looming 2.3-million-metric-ton food deficit. Without significant help from the international community, many people will starve to death in this once proud nation. What could we do in the face of such need? We needed a food source that could renew itself quickly. We decided to think small—as small as a chicken egg.

Chicken eggs hatch in twenty-one days. Both the chicken and the egg are edible. Even more promising, the chicken is a traditional food source for many families.

It seemed like a good fit, so we launched our Chicken Project with three incubators, managed by a family that has its own small operation. Chickens are hatched and raised until they are one month or three months old. Then we sell them as potential laying hens or as meat birds to needy families.

Orders are really starting to flock in, so to speak. An aid agency may order several thousand chicks from us to give to families who are leaving the refugee camps and returning to their villages to start over.

DIRECT SEEDING AGRICULTURAL PROJECT

Beginning in the mid-1980s, a revolution occurred in dryland (non-irrigated) farming throughout North America. Dryland wheat farmers were seeing significant increases in yield by employing direct seeding/no till methods, and they had a near total conversion to these methods.

Obviously, with the food deficits and an ever-increasing flow of wheat and other cereal grains into our country, this looked like an attractive alternative. If the increases experienced in North America could be duplicated elsewhere, it would have a very positive impact not only on their local agricultural economy but also on their food supply.

We did extensive research to compare sites in North America with a certain area needing assistance. We selected sites with similar soil types, annual rainfall, and growing seasons. Our research predicted very conservatively that we should expect to double the amount of wheat grown per acre using traditional methods.

We purchased a John Deere Direct Seeder and other equipment, loaded a forty-foot container, and shipped it. We also purchased a tractor, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization supplied the seed.

In January, amid a three-year drought, we planted some winter wheat. Several curious local farmers planted wheat using traditional methods next to our site. With only 40 percent of normal rainfall that year, the harvest was very light. The farmers had nothing, but our yield at least allowed us to recover the seed we had planted. This was quite a success, given the lack of moisture.

Unrest in the country kept us from planting in the fall, but we were able to resume our project in January. Although drought conditions still linger, this wheat crop should produce, as predicted, a notable increase in yield.

This project has significant implications for the entire nation. Helping farmers catch up with some of the agricultural advances of the past quarter century is one way to express our concern as they put the pieces of their lives, their families, and their communities back together. Instead of giving them a bag of flour, we are teaching them how to double their yield.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

We have made our share of mistakes, but we have also picked up a number of valuable lessons along the way:

Several organizations working together, instead of competing with each other, can have a significant impact. Too often we see organi-

zations carving out their territory or setting up only their own projects. What we end up with is a patchwork of projects that fall well short of their potential. We need to find ways to work together (Psalm 133).

If entrepreneurs use their gifts to meet people's felt needs, everyone wins. International business interests often show up in impoverished areas of the world simply to exploit opportunities. If you come with the same gifts and abilities but use them to help, the results are life-changing (Phil. 2:4).

If my partners are successful, then I am successful. If we are all on the same team, then it makes sense to see others prosper (Phil. 2:3).

The basic principles underlying a successful business enterprise are the same in other countries as they are in my hometown: vision, planning, implementation, tenacity, and accountability (Eccles. 1:9).

Seek out the implementers. Most of us have the ability to come up with good ideas. Certain people, however, are gifted at implementation. Find them, make them part of your team, and empower them to implement. Give them the tools they need and take away as many obstacles as you can (1 Cor. 12:21).