The “Poshan” Project
Mumbai, India
Reed College
Anoushka Goenka and Eashan Thatte

Summary:
The “Poshan” Project was a nutrition-focused project aimed at increasing awareness of methods to improve dietary goals. We utilized resources from the University of Mumbai to compile a list of techniques and tips that the residents of Dharavi could use in their daily lives to increase the nutritive value of the foods they eat.

Project Description:
- How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project?

While neither of us experienced real food insecurity growing up, we have always been aware of the issue of malnutrition that has been plaguing our home country of India for generations. The residents of Dharavi simply don’t have the resources, the time, or the money to spend hours every day going to the freshest markets, getting the best vegetables, meat, grains, and cooking supplies to prepare healthy, filling, and nutritional meals. They rely on simply prepared vegetables like okra, spinach, potatoes, and other bhajis that they can pick up from the closest street vendors. The meals that they eat are also generational in their scope. These are not meals that follow the latest health science or nutritional recommendations. These are meals that their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents have been eating for decades. History and culture shape the food that they eat, so much so that to fix their nutrition would mean upending generations of tradition.

Because of this, we decided not to try and change their eating habits directly. Instead, we would give them tools that are rooted in modern health science to maximize the nutritive value and reduce the cost of the preparations they are already comfortable with. For example, one of the tricks that we came up with involved reusing the water they boiled their vegetables in for kneading dough and cooking dal and lentils. This increases protein and fiber absorption and reduces their overall water usage, making it more available for other uses. Another trick was to buy unprocessed rice and dals, which, while being a little harder to work with, are both cheaper and higher in fiber and vitamin content. One of the issues in Dharavi was that the vegetables they bought were rarely fresh. Because of this, they needed to use these techniques to maximize every bit of the vitamins and minerals found in their vegetables, making it easier for the body to break them down and utilize them.

We worked with the Nirmala Niketan College of Home Science and the University of Mumbai to come up with these tips and created posters in a variety of languages to put up all over Dharavi. We gave them to students in schools, to shopkeepers for customers, and door-to-door to ensure that households had them whenever they were cooking. These posters were printed in the 4 languages most common in Dharavi: Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, and English. We went to neighborhoods that were specifically dominated by one language group or another to ensure that the right households got the posters that were made for them.

- Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

We decided, for this project, that we would attempt to tackle it in an area of India that has always been underserved and denigrated for being poverty-stricken, dirty, and dangerous: The Mumbai slum of Dharavi. Dharavi is one of the largest slums in the world, serving as the waste processing center for the
whole city. Our first steps in the slum were taken through alleyways of trash processing shops, where workers of all ages comb through Mumbai’s recycling and garbage from sunrise to sunset. The women of the household sit outside their doors with dirty vessels and utensils, cleaning each with a small tub of water, a portion of their hour-a-day water ration.

Before we began our project, we spent the first few days walking around Dharavi to get a feel of the slum and to map out neighborhoods that we wanted to come back to. Through one of our family members, we were introduced to Peter, a local Dharavi schoolteacher and resident, who was able to give us a tour and help us start our surveying process. He introduced us to a local doctor who we also talked to about the health outcomes for residents in the slum. Peter was an invaluable resource to us as he helped us navigate the hustle and bustle of the busy streets of Dharavi.

- What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?
  Originally, our plan was to distribute materials through WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook. However, after conducting our survey of Dharavi, we realized that the technological capabilities of households were limited. Most households had a TV, but few adults possessed smartphones, and even fewer women possessed phones of any kind. We had also planned to be more hands-on in our transformation of their diets, but our survey and cultural impressions made us realize that residents were not willing to change the way they were eating in such a complete manner. Because of this, we pivoted to the posters and created tips that were accessible to every cultural group in Dharavi, regardless of income, language, or dietary restrictions.

- Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?
  No other fundraising efforts contributed to our project.

- Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe.
  We believe so. When we were talking to the professors at Nirmala Niketan College of Home Science and the University of Mumbai, the idea of implementing a microgreens program in Dharavi came up. We realized that microgreens are 1. Space-effective, 2. Cheap to implement en masse, and 3. Packed with nutritional content, making them a good choice for cramped households in Dharavi. If we were to go back, we would attempt to buy microgreens in bulk and help residents install small planter boxes in their homes, further increasing the availability of nutrition.

Reflection:
- How do you define peace?
  We define peace as safety, security, and sustainability.

- In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?
  We expect our project to provide peace to the residents of this slum by allowing them to focus on the integration of nutrition into their meals at a low cost. By achieving our goals, we expect the overall living quality of the households we help to improve, thereby creating meaningful change and peace in a region like Dharavi. We attempt to increase sustainability by reducing food waste and water waste, increasing the availability of these resources for other uses and reducing costs overall. And we address safety by trying to ensure that nutrition is maximized so people are safe and healthy. Short-term, people were hesitant to implement even these small changes, but once we spoke to them in detail about these tips, they became more convinced and willing to make these changes for their own benefit. Long-term, we expect our project to proliferate in the community and for the general awareness of the importance of nutrition to become common knowledge for all residents in the community.
What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issue or utilized approaches/strategies?

People in Dharavi generally have a way of doing things that they've done for a very long time. All of the residents we talked to have not only lived in Dharavi all their lives, but have had parents or grandparents for whom Dharavi was their lifelong home. This made it somewhat difficult for us to try and change the way they've done things for their whole lives. For that reason, we pivoted our project to a “softer” form of outreach, one that was less culturally invasive and easier to digest. Another issue we expected to have but didn’t actually occur related to the visibility of the slum for local charities and NGOs looking to make a difference. We assumed that there would be some fatigue or weariness from the locals interacting with us, since there are countless charitable organizations that go door-to-door doing work in Dharavi that don’t actually make a difference or impression on the lives of individuals. Luckily, this wasn’t the case. We found that residents were more than happy to talk to us about their personal lives, and we only experienced a few cases of rejection.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

Yes, it has. This project has made us both hyper-aware of our privilege and how our backgrounds shape who we are as people. Both of us have been exceedingly lucky to have been born into households that haven’t experienced the insecurity that Dharavi locals experience on a daily basis. This project has also reinforced our belief in the importance of culture, and the idea that culture can be found in the unlikeliest of places. We stumbled upon a shop in Dharavi that had been making Ganesha statues for years, with the highest levels of craftsmanship. There are pottery workers making diyas starting at the crack of dawn, using the most traditional methods. There is so much to learn and witness in these areas that we have been awed and amazed at the ways our views of Indian culture have changed over the course of this project.

Personal Statement:
A brief statement, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing the value of this project and what you have learned. Indicate the student’s name (yours or your teammates’) for quote attribution.

Anoushka Goenka: The passion we have for addressing food insecurity doesn’t just stem from the desire to see people healthy and happy; rather, it coincides with our desire to see people have a voice in their own communities.

Eashan Thatte: Through our conversations with Dharavi locals and our forays into daily life and culture in India’s largest slum, we have learned the value of culture, tradition, and the importance of having resources to live a happy, healthy life.