

Title of Project: Skill Development Centre for Peace
Country of project implementation: India
Sponsoring College: International House Alberta, University of Alberta
Designated Project Leader: Isha Godara, India, University of Alberta

Section I: Narrative

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project.

The project was meant to provide a safe learning space and skill development opportunities for children and women of Kheowali village.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

I did not raise any money apart from this grant. However, I asked people to donate gently used books and received some donated books.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

I spoke to girls of my village from the age group of 10-14 years who explained that they do not have a safe space to study and learn after school. Additionally, they do not have opportunities to get career counselling and to learn any vocation skills. We found a community centre in our village that is in the middle of the village and accessible for everyone and safe for girls and women to come. We decided to renovate the community centre and use it to host the centre.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

There are multiple reasons for it. I have outlined following reasons:

- People are used to the status quo especially in terms of gender norms so they do not see the need to provide learning and development opportunities to girls and women.
- The literacy levels in villages are low so they do not value higher education opportunities and do not have the knowledge to set up educational programs as well.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

I had a pre-existing connection with the village as my family lives there and I have visited the place many times. So, I was able to connect easily with locals and understand the problems and work together on solving the issues. Additionally, I was easily able to find some people as staff and work as community partners who can carry on the project even after I leave.

What was it like to work in your host site?

I enjoyed the overall process of working at the host site. Initially, many old people were a little hesitant of the project as it challenged the status quo a little. After some consultation and meetings with them, I was able to get their support. The children and women were quite supportive of the project. The one challenge I faced was during renovation. People in India are not so punctual and the grant money was released late so the actual renovation process got quite delayed.

f. Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways? g. What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

As I mentioned earlier, some village elders objected to the use of the community centre as they did not understand the purpose of it. I had some difficulty explaining myself as the idea was novel and I was used to explaining new ideas in the format of business presentations. Hence, I spoke to some people who are from the village and a little bit more educated who were able to understand the ideas. They had better connections with the village elders and were able to explain the ideas to them more clearly. Additionally, I collaborated with the village head and government officials and got their endorsement for the project too.

How do you define peace?

Peace is the absence of violence. Additionally, peace means a state where people can argue with each other and debate with each other about their ideas respectfully. Even if an opposing idea gets implemented, we should be able to politely accept each other.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

In the short-term, it has provided a platform in the village for students, especially girls to convene, learn new skills and discuss various social issues. Additionally, the project has received traction from villagers and many of them have started getting involved in community projects such as tree plantation, cleanliness etc. All these things are bringing a harmonious atmosphere in the village.

In the long-term, children and women will get educated and become empowered. They will be able to advocate for themselves and stand up for injustices such as domestic violence. As they become more educated and aware, they will be able to identify community issues and work collaboratively to solve them.

Please describe changes created by the project during the summer?

During summer, because of the delay in the grant we were not able to get the space ready in time so our actual project will start from 5th September. However, we started doing preliminary work in summer that brought following changes:

- As people heard about the project, many women came forward with the skills they want to learn and the help they need. I along with some volunteers was able to find some resources for them.
- Many people expressed interest in starting to do community work. We were able to do a massive tree plantation event as a result of it.
- Students showed tremendous interest in being part of the program. Prior to setting up the space, we started reading and art activities with them in which they enthusiastically participated.
- I met a few local government officials regarding this project and they were supportive of the idea and connected me to more resources that can be used by community members for further development.

Please describe anticipated changes that will continue in the future as a result of the project.

- Improved literacy of children. There will be many books suitable for various reading levels for children. By reading it, they can improve their reading and literacy. This will enable them to perform better academically and get access to good educational opportunities.
- Collaboration opportunities: The renovated community centre can be used by various stakeholders in the village as a meeting space to collaborate on various projects.
- Skill development: Women will be able to access tech support and other resources that will enable them to learn vocational skills and gain financial independence.
- Community development: As various segments in villages (children, women etc.) will gain progress, they will be able to work together to make the community more prosperous.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

This project has provided me with a better understanding of the complex social issues and their intersection. For example, initially I was hoping to work on just an education focused project. After spending a few months with the village and teaching students, I realized how these children are affected by the financial conditions at their house and especially their mother's independence.

I was primarily interacting with children and over time I have learnt how to involve different stakeholders and so I can get their partnership in different projects and we can work together.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, please describe any impacts you and/or community members engaged in your experience.

COVID-19 brought delays in terms of access to funding, contractors for renovation etc. So it delayed the overall execution of project.

How did you advance your projects goals despite these challenges?

I used the time of delay to build rapport with community members to set up the project for success in the long-run. I consulted 100+ women and girls to understand their challenges. With this work, some community members came forward and decided to help the project. For example, staff of the primary health care centre of our village came to me and offered to host regular health workshops for women.

What advice would you give to future PfP grantees given the pandemic-related challenges you experienced?

- Always stay flexible. If you need to make changes to your project, contact your campus contact and get their advice.
- Start connecting with community members in advance so you get a good understanding of the community and can deliver something that will be impactful in the long-run.
- Reach out to community organizations and government officials for help. You might get connected to resources that can help in enhancing your project.
- Don't forget to connect with locals and understand their culture and have fun with them.
- Take lots of pictures (I regret not taking enough pictures).

Personal Statement

“With the help of this project, I was able to give the young girls in my village the same support that I received at their age which enabled me to become a confident, hardworking and kind person.”

- Isha Godara
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Section II: Photographs

