Summary of the goals of the project:

The goal of the project Unnati was to secure financial independence for women in rural areas while working towards creating an eco-friendly alternative to single-use plastic i.e., used newspaper bags.

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

No additional fundraising activities were pursued.

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

I have grown up in Rohini, Delhi wherein I have witnessed a large quantity of disposed waste majorly single-use plastic and other non-biodegradable materials amassing into a mountain of trash over the years. With time, the dumping site became mountainous majorly because of the excessive dumping of single-use plastic waste which piled up and failed to decompose over the years. This menace compelled the government authorities to think of an alternative site and made the locals regret their decision of completely relying upon single-use plastic to fulfil their daily needs. It was this situation that compelled me to think about creating alternative sources of single-use plastic bags and bring into use the used newspaper which anyway had a shelf life of a day to make newspaper bags.

Employing women to perform the task of making used newspaper bags was the decision taken at the stage of target workforce identification. It was the deplorable condition of the rural women due to lack of financial independence which made me choose them as the target workforce. Therefore, it was the aspiration to create an eco-friendly alternative to the single-use plastic bag and empower the marginalised section of the society i.e., rural women who inspired me to come up with the project.

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

India is a developing economy and the issues which I targeted or worked upon i.e., large scale usage of single-use plastic and lack of financial independence of women in rural areas, are persistent on large scale in such countries. The three major reasons for the existence of these issues are -

1. Low level of literacy & awareness

The concept of waste management and waste segregation is not familiar amongst the masses due to the low level of literacy and awareness. The literacy rate in the state of Haryana where the project was undertaken is 67.91% which projects the inability of people to understand and implement such concepts in day-to-day affairs. Due to lack of education, the awareness about issues like sanitation and waste management or switching to eco-friendly alternatives are not familiar amongst the masses.

2. The availability of cheaper alternative

The consumer market in India is price sensitive and the buyer's decision is contingent upon the affordability of a product. In such a scenario opting for a cheaper option takes priority over choosing an eco-friendly alternative which is comparatively expensive. It is the price factor that majorly triggers the issue of buying a single-use plastic bag which further leads to environmental pollution on large scale.

3. Excessive dependency upon women to assume the role of housemaker

One of the major issues which I aim to target through the project is to make women self-reliant and financially independent by allowing them to work and earn from home. In rural areas, the avenues for earning a livelihood for women are very limited. They majorly depend upon their male counterparts to sustain their livelihood. This often leads to their victimisation in silence. Therefore, I believe the prime reason for the existence of this problem is the lack of home-based opportunities for women empowerment.
Why did you choose your host site to work in?

The prime reason to choose Badshahpur, Gurugram and Bawana, Delhi was the ease of access from Delhi to these villages. Both the sites are villages located in the suburbs of Delhi wherein my partner organisation V.Rishi Greenforce foundation was actively working on different projects. Therefore, I was able to get the ground support and manpower to implement my vision in these places without any difficulty.

What was it like to work on your host site?

Initially, the people were hesitant to cooperate and created various hurdles in the initiation of the project. It is where the credibility of the V.Rishi Greenforce foundation came into use. As the foundation had been working for a long in the target area and had delivered various projects in the past like creating and providing affordable sanitary napkins to women and affordable e-rickshaws, winning the trust of the locals gradually became an achievable task. The people were smart enough to learn the basics of creating the bag and even quickly understood the importance of the bag as an eco-friendly alternative as compared to the polluting one.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

Since the people in the village were highly dependent upon single-use plastic for their daily usage it became a challenging task to explain to them that switching to the paper bag as an alternative was not a difficult task. The people were initially sceptical of the following –

1. Tensile strength of the bag – The people in the village were under the impression that paper bags lacks the strength to hold heavy objects. Contrary to their belief our multilayer newspaper bag proved to be strong enough to carry 2-3 kg of weight without any struggle.

2. That paper bag is extremely expensive- It was believed by many shopkeepers that providing the goods in newspaper bags to the customer would be an expensive task and will take a toll on their revenue. Thus, convincing them to switch to an eco-friendly and relatively cheaper alternative was a big challenge.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

In the initial stage when I was outreaching to women in rural areas to create a team or workforce, I got to know about the stigma associated with working women. In close-knit societies of the village, the men or the head of the family strongly opposed to the idea of women of their house getting involved in any kind of outside work. So, I had to initially depend upon men working in factories, to begin with, the sample making of the bag. But later, I was approached by two groups of women who happily agreed to work when I showed them the sample bags and explained the relevance of the same for the environment.

How do you define peace?

I consider peace as the foundational aspect of human existence. It is a state wherein we are not in a tussle with nature for basic resources and can live up to our fullest potential. Having scarcity of water due to rivers choked with single-use plastic can never help in living to the fullest potential and will always keep us in a state of constant struggle. Being in security that all natural resources are preserved in their pristine form is the foundation of peace.

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

In the short run, the main impact was that the project successfully created a proof of concept of a sustainable and scalable idea. With the use of funds and ground support, people in the villages were made to believe that there are better and eco-friendly alternatives to single-use plastic in society that can be relied upon. The project helped during the summer to sensitise the locals about the benefits of used newspaper bags and the repercussions of using plastic. They were trained to make the bag to sustain their livelihood while contributing to the environment positively.

In the long run, since the people have now been introduced to the concept of used newspaper bags and the economic benefits that can be derived from selling them, it is anticipated that a small manufacturing hub will soon be created. With the help of local women and community groups working for women, the rural women will be able to create and scale up the market of used newspaper bags. It is strongly believed that shopkeepers who were initially hesitant in selling these bags will avail the benefit of the proximity of these centres and switch to the newspaper bags as they will eventually be affordable. Overall, if this trend continues, I expect a transition in the habits of the people who would prefer used newspaper bags oversingle-use plastic.
Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

Broadly speaking, the project has changed my perception of society, and it's needs. I have realised that it is essential to keep in mind the fact that ground reality differs substantially from what we perceive from the outside. The project helped me realise that while designing any project for social welfare the opinion of the actual beneficiaries should be noted as it brings practicality in the approach and avoids struggles at the stage of implementation.

I have maturated as a social worker in terms of my thoughts, plans and execution strategy. I have now learnt the skill of identifying the smaller problems associated with the bigger problem quickly and efficiently. This summer, I have discovered

my passion to collaborate more deeply with the members of society and struggle along to solve their problems proactively. Interestingly, I have changed as a person as now I have learnt the ability of human resource management and found the tricks to get work done within a short period.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Due to the pandemic, I had to relook for people to help me in the project as a lot of them denied do work and contribute due to fear of covid. Secondly, since the small and medium businesses were already running under losses it was not the ideal time to experiment with an alternative that was relatively priced high.

At the end of your narrative, please provide a one- to a two-sentence personal statement, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing how and why this project was valuable and what was the most important thing you learned as a result.

“Bringing a positive change in society by transforming your idea to reality is the biggest superpower we all have withinus.”- Akshat Shonak

Please provide the team leader full name and, if applicable, a full list of team member names along with associated permanent contact email address for our PfP alumni database (do not provide your college/university issued email address). This list will only be used internally for follow up/research contact and will not be distributed outside of Projects for Peace.

Akshat Shonak