

the first thing we offer is respect



# iNK

indigo news & knowledge



# inside indigo

*By Jemma Bailey (General Manager) and Sally Stevenson (Chairperson)*

Welcome to the first edition of iNK Magazine – named not just for the acronym “indigo News and Knowledge” but also a reference to the origins of our name. Indigo is a natural and resilient plant widely used by women in the Asia-Pacific to make an ‘ink’ that is used as a dye, often for thread to weave. It is a rich and beautiful colour from what can look like a pretty scrappy plant. We think it can be an analogy for successful community development – rich and beautiful results from what might seem to be harsh and difficult conditions. iNK will replace our hard copy newsletters. If you have any feedback or suggestions on the new format – or what you would like to read more about – please get in touch.

It has been a busy and rewarding six months for indigo foundation. After much robust discussion at a board level and with partners, volunteers, supporters and stakeholders, the board signed off on our strategic plan 2017-2022. This document sets a clear course, both for the directions of the development program and for building internal capacity and sustainability – see the article in this edition of iNK and the website for the plan in full.

Based on the strategic plan, we are excited to launch a new partnership in Indonesia with grassroots women-run organisation PEKKA Lodan Doe. We have signed a three-year commitment to support the Women’s Empowerment School, which helps women who have dropped out of school to complete their year 10 and 12 exams and runs a year-long course for local women on government and civic education. This new program encapsulates key directions in our strategic plan – it is focused on women’s rights, it partners with an organisation that engages in advocacy and builds the capacity of women to be advocates and it is in a cluster in Eastern Indonesia with two other partners, Nefo Ko’u and Lua Lemba. We look forward to sharing more information as the partnership progresses.

As you will read in this edition, our program in Namibia has met recent challenges. It is important to us that we share not only the success stories but also the problems that arise in community development. One of our guiding principles is transparency and this is not only something we ask of our overseas partners, it is something we strive to be with supporters in Australia.

Our annual indigo foundation gathering for board, staff and volunteers was held in Canberra in February. It was a fantastic weekend delving into the strategic plan, as well as sharing stories and challenges from our community partners and reconnecting with friends and colleagues. Many thanks to Alice Roughley who hosted a wonderful dinner on the Saturday night and to Burgmann College for providing a wonderful venue.

Our thanks as always go to our wonderful community of supporters.

Warm wishes  
Sally and Jemma

# otjiwarongo growing and learning in namibia



SOCCKER TEAM SUPPORTED BY THE OWETOVENI  
YOUTH SPORT AND CULTURAL PROGRAM

*Deborah Raphael, Project Coordinator*

It is not a short journey from Sydney to Otjiwarongo in Namibia. I had made it before, the long haul flight from Sydney to Windhoek via Johannesburg and then the 3-4 hour road trip to the dusty town in Namibia's central northern highlands. As I drove the road I wished the community development process was as straight and well signposted.

Lack of social, educational and recreational facilities for young people was the entry point for our engagement with the community in the township of Orwetoveni, which spreads into the informal settlements around Otjiwarongo. Through a series of consultations with Rotary Macquarie Park and then with indigo foundation, commencing in 2012, the community has identified youth unemployment rates amongst the highest in southern Africa and an urgent need for youth focussed activities to address social vulnerability and in particular the need for a dedicated space. (The Namibian National Youth Policy defines youth as individuals between 16 and 30 years.)

A community committee was convened under the name of Otjiwarongo Development Program Fund (ODPF) to partner with indigo foundation. Funds were raised by our partner Rotary Macquarie Park, a liaison officer was appointed

and Otjiwarongo Municipal Council agreed to lease a sizeable block of land for a youth centre. ODPF identified some priority activities which could be funded whilst it formally registered as an association (which can be a lengthy and time consuming process, but would also indicate the commitment of ODPF to its objective). These would foster the relationship with indigo foundation and with their own constituency. The first funds were sent in May 2015. Visiting in October of that year Libby House, our Development Co-ordinator, and I found the start encouraging and another raft of small activities including several focussed on income generation were funded in June 2016.

By the time of my visit in March this year, four years since consultations commenced, we had reached a critical point for moving forward on the youth centre. To commit to building the centre would be a major step for both us and the community. From the perfunctory reporting I had been receiving I already had concerns about the commitment of some committee members and the lack of progress in registration. I particularly feared that the Council might renege on the offer of that parcel of land if there was further delay in registration. The land is well positioned for easy access from the informal settlements. I arrived in Otjiwarongo hoping that ODPF would show me that it was now capable of leading and administering a sustainable and broadly based program of development in its community.

The 10 days I spent in the township were jam-packed with meetings with the committee, council officials, other organisations, and community members and of course project site visits. Monica Tjediua our liaison officer had, at short notice, joined a council delegation to Durban during the second week. It was a rare opportunity for her to gain international experience and I encouraged her to go. Fortunately, Joseph Paulus the Chairperson was a constant presence throughout our visit with

other committee members also in attendance at key meetings.

I will be honest. ODPF did not pass close scrutiny in several areas. One was the size of the committee. There were only five of the original eight committee members remaining. The founding Chairman moved away shortly after establishment and eventually the mantle fell on Joseph as deputy chair. Joseph is an aspiring politician, energetic and full of ideas but it has been a steep learning curve for him. Two members have fallen by the wayside. Meetings are held sporadically but with only five it is hard to get a quorum. At our first meeting they told me it was difficult to find good volunteers to join the committee so it was better to continue with the smaller number.

Fortunately monitoring and evaluation visits often reinvigorate relationships with the community and at our final meeting the committee concluded that more members and a better gender balance were essential. My concern relating to registration may have resolved itself after meeting with a young accountant who clearly understood the necessary steps to NGO registration and assured us it could be done promptly. The chief adviser to Honourable Julius Neumbo Chair of the regional Council subsequently confirmed the advice and offered to facilitate it through his office. I then realised it had been unrealistic to expect ODPF to deal with this without professional support. Of course the process may turn out to be not so simple but the path is clearer.

Like many fledgling organisations ODPF has found financial and activity-reporting requirements have stretched its capacity, especially without an administrator, office space or regular internet access. Maintaining proper basic accounting practices and processes requires a level of integrity capacity that has gaps in ODPF but which I believe can be improved by introduction of some simple protocols. Field visits are an excellent fraud detection mechanism and it did not take an auditor to discover that there had been diversion of some funds. To his credit the Treasurer confessed at a committee meeting and after some days of trying to calculate exactly how much was diverted an amount was agreed. A statement was signed acknowledging the



ORWETOVENI YOUTH PROJECT DANCERS

misuse and undertaking to repay the funds over 12 months. His position was terminated. Hands were shaken all around and he departed. It was a cathartic experience for the committee and a small triumph for indigo foundation's emphasis on transparency for all the communities with whom we work.

In between the marathon of forensic accounting I visited each of the small projects that had been funded. ODPF is currently seen as a collection of these small projects each championed by a committee member. Such lack of cohesion means ODPF has not yet created a public organisational identity for itself, which is a weakness and transparency issues rise again in relation to committee members' interests. But there are efforts to change this with Joseph maintaining an ODPF Facebook page with plenty of photos and suggestions from Hon. Nuembo that ODPF be represented on some regional committees that are been formed.

On a positive note OtjiVeg continues to thrive under the patient stewardship of Hendrik Morosi a committee member. OtjiVeg is well known but not as part of ODPF. In 2013 it was a start-up coop. Four years later produce is sold daily at the market and supplied to local hotels and guesthouses. Profits are put back into a poultry side business. The seven regular volunteers share in the profits and fresh produce in return for daily commitment to the garden and there has been an unexpected outcome in an increased interest in market gardening across Otjiwarongo. Nineteen groups have applied for plots under the new Otjiwarongo Municipal Council small-scale agricultural projects program including an Otjivegs expansion and TW Tulongeni Project and Ashwell Graphics Academy all of which have received support through the indigo foundation partnership.



OM MAHA TARA DI WOMEN'S CATERING COOPERATIVE, HARD AT WORK

Om-Maha Tara di project is also flourishing in a small way. This is a women's catering cooperative, which received a seeding grant for equipment to expand its business beyond a fat cakes (balls of fried dough) stand. Purchase of a deep freeze has enabled the coop to keep meat (kudu or Oryx), which is grilled on the new braai (grill) stand. Profits are slowly going into poultry (3 hens so far) so hardboiled eggs can be added to the menu.

The Owetoveni Youth Sport and Cultural Program was launched in July 2015 with purchase of sporting equipment, drums, projector, video camera and computer. Originally based in the Multipurpose Help Centre and overseen by Monica Tjehiua it relocated to the home of a volunteer in the informal settlements in July 2016 because of shortage of space. It has continued since then in a modest way but there has been no funding since October 2016 because of the Treasurer's actions. The volunteer program coordinator is very able and is understandably disappointed that the on-going support for her project has been misappropriated. My impression is that it is sufficiently well established to be fully reinstated should further funding become available during 2017.

The only disappointment was the Orweto Brickworks, which was associated with the Treasurer. It was hard to see that any bricks had been produced, the orange cement mixer was unused and the generator missing. The cost of the generator has been added to the Treasurer's indebtedness until such time as the generator is produced. The committee has requested return of the cement mixer.

On 21 March Namibian Independence Day was celebrated. Namibia gained independence in 1990 after a lengthy armed struggle with South Africa. Each year major celebrations are held in one town. This was not Otjiwarongo's year but most people appeared to be enjoy special meals with family. We were entertained by some talented young dancers, musicians and actors from the Ashwell Graphics Academy, which operates from Joseph's home. The stage was the dusty shade clothed yard. The group has been coming together on weekends for 3 or 4 years to support and encourage each other and develop their creativity and skills. Occasionally there are opportunities to perform for a small audience but they long for a hall in which to practice. There had been a lot of enthusiastic use of the Apple iMac (purchased using indigo foundation funding) after its arrival in July last year and several short videos had been made. I had arranged donation of a better camera but shortly before my arrival the iMac took a serious fall. There are currently no funds for repairs.

Notwithstanding the various setbacks I left Otjiwarongo feeling positive about the future of ODPF provided the committee can be reconstituted very shortly and registration effected. The land is still available and most critically there is strong support both from Otiwarongo Municipal Council and the Hon. Neumbo. The first two years has been an extraordinary learning experience for both the committee and us.

# shebar high school

a success story for rural education in afghanistan



ON THE BUILDING SITE AT SHEBAR HIGH SCHOOL

*Ali Reza Yunespour, Project Coordinator*

This month, students of Shebar High School in Jirghai area of Ghazni Province will attend school in the new indigo foundation funded school building. It is a historic moment for Shebar community and the 350 students in this school because their classes were held under the tents, nearby old shops and in open spaces since its reopening in 2003. After this, the current and future students of this school have access to proper and safe building - the minimum infrastructure necessity for quality education.

The building of Shebar High School is a significant achievement for our partnership with Jirghai schools. Following our successful community development programs in Borjegai, we have established a partnership known as Jirghai School Project in 2013. indigo foundation has supported three Jirghai High Schools with a teacher training program in 2013 and provided furniture for Imam Hussein High School in 2015. With kind assistance from the Planet Wheeler Foundation and a significant individual donor, the Jirghai community successfully completed the construction of Shebar High School building in October 2016, the first indigo foundation funded school building in Jirghai community. In 2017, we are working to grow and strengthen further our partnership with Jirghai schools.

The dedication and collective commitment of Shebar community to keep their school open

and to work with us to construct the eight-room school last year is a success story for rural education in Afghanistan. Sadly, elsewhere in the country, around 600-1,000 public schools either remained closed or were forced to close because of violence and ongoing conflict particularly in rural villages and districts in some of the Southern, Eastern and Northern provinces.

## historical background

Shebar High School was initially established as a public maktab-e dehati (village school) in Shebar mosque in the second half of 1960s. It was a primary school and taught basic reading and writing skills to a very small number of predominantly male students. After completing this school, the students of Shebar High School and Jahan Numa school in Jirghai attended Borjegai School, which then had classes up to Grade 8.

However, the local people had a negative perception of the so-called 'modern' education and largely associated the state-sanctioned dehati schools with 'secular' ideas. Some of the Mullahs and tribal elders presented the dehati schools as agents for state influence in local communities, specifically as places which spread and recruited young students to the then growing factions of the Communist Party, known as the The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). In particular, most of the elders and Mullahs did not send their own children and, as much as they could, prevented the children of their co-villagers and relatives from attending schools.

When dehati schools were introduced in Borjegai and Jirghai, I worked extremely hard not to allow the children of my co-villagers to attend those schools... people then had a different perception of schools, and I now know that it was a mistake. But, my decision was then justified

considering how quickly communist ideas were spreading in schools, and how easily students were recruitment targets for the state and the growing PDPA [Mohammad, an old resident of Kamrak village, Borjegai, Afghanistan].

In 1978, the PDPA-led 'coup' ended the monarchy rule and resulted in the full closure of all three schools: Borjegai School, Shebar School and Jahan Numa School. From around 500 students attending these schools, only a few students (perhaps 10-20 students) managed to go to Kabul to continue their education. To the best knowledge of the local elders interviewed for this report, only one student completed Grade 12 from Borjegai and Jirghai schools in the 1970s. Interestingly, that graduate was the keynote speaker at the joint Graduation Ceremony for the new Borjegai and Jirghai university graduates that I attended in Kabul in December 2017.

Although Borjegai school operated as a learning centre throughout the 1980s and 1990s (predominantly provided Islamic education and basic reading and writing skills), Shebar and Jahan Numa Schools remained fully closed for three decades until the 'fall' of the Taliban regime in 2001. As a result, the building of Shebar school, which was constructed in the early 1970s, was severely damaged due to heavy snow and lack of regular maintenance.

In the absence of schools, local mosques continued to provide informal basic education in Borjegai and Jirghai. They hired a teacher, often a 'religious' man, who predominantly taught the Quran, Arabic grammar and Persian poetry and classic stories, notably the well-known books of Hafiz and Gulistan-e Saadi. Following the local mosques, a few students went to attend schools in neighbouring districts and provinces, and some migrated to neighbouring countries, particularly Iran, to continue their madrasa education.

In the 1990s, some local mosques also taught the Mujahidin-sanctioned textbooks especially basic mathematics, Dari language, geography and occasionally natural sciences. Yet, those textbooks were very old, outdated, and full of militancy and 'Jihad' contents. As Craig Davis observed in 2002:



ALI VISITING THE OLD SHEBAR HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS - INSIDE TENTS

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Education for Afghanistan, located in Peshwar, Pakistan, and operated by the Afghan mujahidin (holy warriors), published a series of primary education textbooks replete with images of Islamic militancy. These schoolbooks provided the mujahidin...with a medium for promoting political propaganda and inculcating values of Islamic militancy into a new generation of holy warriors prepared to conduct Jihad against the enemies of Islam.

### the new era

Following the 'fall' of the Taliban, the new Constitution of Afghanistan recognised education as a human right and made the state responsible for provide 'free' education up to Bachelor level. In addition, the international donors and Ministry of Education (MoE) considered education as a strategy to alleviate poverty, ensure economic development, maintain the country's Islamic and cultural values, and enhance social harmony.

To achieve those ambitious and wide-ranging goals, the MoE, international donors, UN agencies, NGOs and the emerging civil society organisations started the 'Back to School' campaign in order to reopen the few existing schools and to also encourage and support families and communities to establish new schools. In such socio-political context, the people of Borjegai and Jirghai embraced the new educational message and worked extremely hard to register a total of 30 public schools (nine in Borjegai and 21 in Jirghai). In addition to the government message, the community members who had migrated to neighbouring countries,

and a small number who took refuge in Western Europe and in Australia, played a significant role in changing the perception of education in these rural communities. Consequently, education in principle became accessible to all school-aged children.

Yet, the overwhelming majority of the newly established schools in Borjagai and Jirghai lacked basic infrastructure and operated in the local mosques, old houses and under the tents. For instance, only Borjagai High School and Jahan Numa High School had an old building amongst the Borjagai and Jirghai schools in 2003. In addition, very few teachers who generally taught in local mosques in the 1980s and 1990s sat for the government exam and received the equivalent of Grade 12 qualifications. Otherwise, most of the teachers had qualifications of up to Grade 6 and its equivalent. More significantly, girls found an opportunity for the first time in the history of these communities to attend primary and secondary schools.

To address the education problems, the Borjagai community approached Salman Jan, an Afghan Australian, for educational support during his personal visit to Kabul in 2003. As a consequence, the partnership between nine Borjagai schools and indigo foundation was established in 2003 and continued until 2015. In just over a decade time, the partnership has raised around AUS500,000 and significantly improved the education landscapes in Borjagai schools. For example:

- The nine Borjagai schools have useable and proper buildings. The indigo foundation -supported Borjagai School Project has constructed four school buildings (Golbona School, Koshkak HS, Wali Asr School and Salman-e Fars School). The community has built two schools themselves (Al-Zahra HS and Abuzar Ghaffari HS) and the other two have received some assistance for their buildings from the Member of Parliaments (Ali Ibn-e Abi Talib HS and Sayyed Jamaluddin HS);
- The Borjagai School project has also provided furniture, safe drinking water, hygiene facilities and storage rooms

(library) for seven schools: Golbona, Wali Asr, Al-Zahra, Koshkak, Salman-e Fars, Sayyed Jamaluddin, and Ali Ibn-e Abi Talib. Furthermore, it has provided a new roof for the old Borjagai High School building;

- Student enrolment has increased in these schools and currently around 3,000 students attend nine Borjagai schools - girls making around 40-45% of the total student enrolment;
- More significantly, around 600-700 students from Borjagai have graduated from or currently study in public higher education institutions. A significant number of them have returned as school teachers, and five of the current nine school principals are former students of Borjagai schools. In a rare development in rural Afghanistan, five female teachers who work in Borjagai schools are also former school graduates of different Borjagai schools.

Following our successful development programs in Borjagai, the construction of Shebar High School is an important milestone achievement for Jirghai community and rural education in Afghanistan. We will continue to work with Jirghai community in order to improve the quality of education and to reduce the widespread gender inequality throughout the network of 21 Jirghai schools.

# "in here, with these women, i feel free"

perspectives on mahalir sakthi



GUNA, JENNIFER, GRACE

*A visit by Jennifer Barton, long time indigo foundation supporter*

In December 2016 I was fortunate to visit Mahalir Sakthi in Madurai. indigo foundation have funded Mahalir Sakthi since 2012 and they helped me set up the visit with Mahalir Sakthi co-founders, Guna and Grace.

Mahalir Sakthi provides opportunities for socially ostracised and economically exploited sections of the community (Dalit and Adivasi, particularly children and women) to improve their lives and live with dignity. They do this in number of ways, chiefly improving education opportunities for children and vocational training for women who left school without gaining qualifications.

Mahalir Sakthi activities are carried out within ten of the two hundred slums located in the city area of Madurai. Guna and Grace told us that domestic violence and alcoholism are major issues among slum families and that one of Mahalir Sakthi's key activities is providing after-school tuition classes for children. Mahalir Sakthi also holds regular meetings for young people with guest speakers to discuss subjects such as education, health and social justice.

Mahalir Sakthi acts as a broker for domestic workers - arranging and supervising their employment. There are currently sixty women in their Domestic Workers Union. They also

run typing and tailoring classes. After gaining these skills, a number of women have increased employment options as well as being able to make clothes for their own families.

We spent most of the day at Mahalir Sakthi's Centre in the slums. During the morning a group of women who are regular attendees at the Centre shared their stories. It soon became clear that the Centre provides an important gathering place for the women, a place where they find friendship advice and support. It also provides medical assistance and guidance on navigating the maze of government bureaucracy.

The first woman to share her story was Shankar, who told us that she is the daughter of street scavengers and is now teaching forty children of scavengers for two hours a day, helping them to develop their speaking skills amongst other things. Her objective is to get them out of the degrading work of cleaning drains and sewers and scavenging for sellable litter.

The second woman we met, Selverani, told us she makes her living from ironing nine hours a day, six days a week with a three kilogram iron heated by charcoal. She said that Mahalir Sakthi has provided support for her and medication for her husband who has TB.

Next were sisters Jocelyn and Jacqueline who had been students at the Centre and are now both undergraduates. They said they benefitted from tuition at the Centre and now 'give back' by teaching children voluntarily for two hours a day in their home. They said Mahalir Sakthi had also given them confidence in their ability and encouragement to study further.

We heard from Amudha whose husband was an alcoholic and died a year ago after a heart attack. Both her children had studied at the Centre. Mahalir Sakthi has given her support and helped her to navigate the government bureaucracy.

Sandara Mari, a young woman with two small daughters, told us that she had worked with Mahalir Sakthi as a tutor for several years but

had to leave to find work when Mahalir Sakthi lost some of its funding from a UK charity. She takes refuge at the Centre when she experiences difficulties.

Then we heard from Muniamal who is a street vendor. Her husband died and she has no children, so is now living alone. She said that Mahalir Sakthi provides her with companionship and support.

The next speaker was Kadha Fatima, a 67 year old lady who earns her living selling scarves and looks after her 33 year old daughter who has spina bifida. She comes to the Centre for a chat and to let her feelings out.

The women told us that Hindu and Muslim people at the Centre and people from different communities would not mix initially, but cooking and eating at the Centre has brought them together.

As school finished, children came into the room, a few at a time. Soon the room filled with other students, both primary and secondary. They assembled ready for a practice session for Mahalir Sakthi's Annual Day to be held the following month. First there was a general knowledge quiz, then some very energetic traditional music and dancing. All the children spoke confidently and were happy to perform.

The younger children then went home and those who remained sat with us in a circle for a discussion session for the last hour of the day. These young people are the 'new wave' of young facilitators who teach the children, with very little pay. We talked together about working hard, making the most of opportunities and being able to think for yourself. There was also discussion about respecting women, eradicating domestic violence and resisting distractions from others who are less ambitious.

We were very moved by the story of one of the young men, Muthukumar, who works sorting mail six days a week from 4.30-8.30am, then attends his course of study in accountancy at a polytechnic. Around 4.30pm he comes to the Centre to study and to help other students. His mother has been unwell but is now recovering with support from Mahalir Sakthi. Grace and Guna have arranged a job for him when he graduates. His sister, Muthulakshmi, was also present and is studying to be a nurse and helping to manage the family with support from Mahalir Sakthi.



SELVERANI & HER CHARCOAL IRON

In many ways the story of this family sums up the work of Mahalir Sakthi in making a difference to the lives of people who are working hard to in the face of big challenges.

## a field visit by indigo foundation

*Project Coordinator John Bolger*

John visited Mahalir Sakthi in February. Excerpts from his trip report below show some of the highlights and why we continue supporting these truly community based, community owned, community led programs.

### What are the key achievements of Mahalir Sakthi?

- A growing number of children supported by Mahalir Sakthi have stayed at school to year 10 in order to sit the National Exam (HSC equivalent) and also the year 12 examination for college/university admission. In the last reporting period, all the Mahalir Sakthi students passed for the first time.
- The tailoring classes remain well supported and in the period since our last visit, 50% of students gained employment in the garment industry, with the balance making clothing in their own homes. Of particular value is the flexibility that Mahalir Sakthi offers in teaching what skills the student needs (rather than a fixed curriculum) and at a time that suits the student. Also valued is the opportunity for former students to make garments using the Mahalir Sakthi

machines when available while they are saving for their own machine.

- Currently over 60 women are registered in the Domestic Workers union, all of them are in employment and Mahalir Sakthi has several potential employers awaiting candidates.
- A domestic worker came in to the Mahalir Sakthi Centre to observe the tailoring class and rest briefly on her way home, volunteering the comment 'In here, with these women, I feel free'.
- The confidence and maturity of the Mahalir Sakthi youth continue to improve with each Field Visit. The standard of questions asked by tuition group students and youth meeting participants at our Q&A sessions demonstrate an admirable interest in topics. For example, are there discussions in Australia about effects of genetically modified crops, are there problems with climate change in Australia also (Tamil Nadu is in the fifth year of a drought), is domestic violence common in Australia and what is the Government doing about it and is there any support for victims.

### Does Mahalir Sakthi governance, management and programs align with indigo foundation Guiding Principles?

- Transparency: Guna and Grace remain the prime decision makers in the activities, and there are regular communication meetings with other members of the Mahalir Sakthi team, tutors, students and local community as well as a number of local NGOs.
- Community ownership: Ownership of Mahalir Sakthi activities are distributed; the after school tuition classes are clearly 'owned' by the facilitators and Mahalir Sakthi organisers alike. The cultural activities showcased during the Mahalir Sakthi Annual Day are certainly owned between participants, parents and the broader community. Ownership of the vocational training is shared between tutors, current and former students of the programs.

- Equity: Mahalir Sakthi is an organisation open to all communities, religions and gender. Their operational group consists of a variety of religions.
- Sustainability: Mahalir Sakthi activities are creating change within their local community and social environment. The organisational sustainability of Mahalir Sakthi is witnessed by the enthusiasm and energy of their youth leaders (most but not all are also tuition class facilitators). A further sign of sustainability is that Mahalir Sakthi have been able to replace facilitators when necessary, which was thought to have been a risk of the new tuition class model introduced in 2015, after they lost significant funding from another donor.

### *John's conclusion*

The values of Mahalir Sakthi closely align with those of indigo foundation, not only with the four guiding principles but also a shared drive to help communities via empowerment and advocacy. The Mahalir Sakthi group remains an inspiring team focused on improving the quality of lives in their marginalised communities.

MAHALIR SAKTHI AUDIENCE FOR A PLAY



As we foreshadowed in our last newsletter, we have been developing our five year strategy.

It has been an excellent process of robust and thoughtful consideration of the past, the present and what we imagine will be the defining elements of a global future. The full strategy will be posted on our website, but for this magazine we would like to highlight a new component of our decision making when identifying and supporting partners and projects: our key focus areas.

In order to grow our influence and impact, we will assess potential community partnerships through the lens of four strategic focus areas, together with our guiding principles, to ensure we use our limited resources to achieve the greatest impact. They are:

## **empowering women and girls**

Entrenched inequality, and in particular discrimination against women and girls, is a driver of poverty. Programs that promote participation and leadership and improve safety and economic empowerment of women and girls have been shown to have a multiplier effect on change, as we have experienced with our community partners in India, Afghanistan and Rote. indigo foundation has always had 'equity' as a guiding principle. We will make empowerment of girls and woman an explicit goal across all our programs and a key filter when considering new partnerships.

## **link with refugee communities**

indigo foundation is committed to justice and fair treatment for refugees and where opportunities arise we will develop in-country projects with Australia-based leaders from refugee communities. This approach builds meaningful relationships in Australia and allows us to manage risk and develop programs in highly marginalised communities that would otherwise not receive external assistance.

## **build program clusters, particularly in the asia pacific**

Geographic clusters of projects will lay the foundation for our community partners to build networks and engage in peer-to-peer learning. A cluster approach can also create efficiencies in terms of program management and program costs will allowing us to capitalize on regional networks. We will remain committed to our current hub of partners in Namibia, Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan, but will not seek to expand our program in Africa.

## **Supporting advocacy for systemic change**

We will support communities and partner organisations to engage in advocacy programs where they seek to influence change in the power structures that support and reinforce the marginalization of communities. This may translate to support for local advocacy organisation or to supporting advocacy activities that communities prioritise to influence change in their communities.

## our people



We will be experiencing a significant change this year as our founding Chair, **Sally Stevenson**, will step down from the Board. In Sally's own words

"After 17 years, I feel the timing is right for me to now step aside: we have a wonderfully strong, experienced and skillful board; a renewed, strategic direction that is both clear and smart; our work on program management, sustainability and impact is under a process of intense review and improvement; our staff Jemma, Libby and Alice, are incredible in what they do, and how they do it; our development team and all our volunteers are both experienced and extraordinary; our finances are good and becoming more and more sustainable; our marketing profile on the rise; and last but not least our community partners continue to inspire with the incredible work they do, and the successes they achieve.

**indigo foundation** couldn't be in a better place, and that must be the best (and most satisfying!) time to leave. When we started indigo foundation, I wanted to be part of establishing a principled

and effective and respectful development organisation - and this we have created. As a maturing organisation, an individual is not, should not, be critical to success - but rather the team, the practice and the philosophy is what makes an organisation strong and successful.

Having said that I'm not leaving indigo foundation *entirely!* I would like to stay involved, in whatever way the Board sees useful, and appropriate, and that discussion will be taking place over the next six or so months. It would be a privilege to keep working with such a wonderful team, which enhances people's lives every day - and who have enhanced mine beyond what I could have imagined on that crazy and naïve day we decided to build our own community development organisation. "

Sally has made an enormous contribution and we will be saying more later in the year to celebrate her work in building indigo foundation over the last 17 years.

In terms of process, the Board will formally decide on the new Chair at the November AGM. Meanwhile, in recognition of the significance of the appointment, the Board has reviewed the terms of reference and are conducting an internal recruitment process with a view to selecting the new Chair in the next few months to allow for a planned transition. If you have any queries, please contact Gwyneth on [gwyneth.graham@indigofoundation.org](mailto:gwyneth.graham@indigofoundation.org)

In other news, we would like to welcome **Marnie Marin** as our new Uganda Program Coordinator. Marnie is a senior project officer with the Department of Health and has spent many years working in the social welfare sector in Australia. We think she'll be great for a role. In welcoming Marnie, we would also like to send many thanks to outgoing Program Coordinator Dr **Ellen Kraly**, whose insights, patience and experience were integral in drafting our new three year commitment agreement with our community partners in Budaka, Uganda.

We would also like to thank **Sue Cunningham**, who has stepped down as Program Coordinator for our education project in Wedweil, South Sudan. Our South Sudan program would not have got off the ground without Sue and her friendship with Program Advisor Santino Yuot. Sue has worked tirelessly alongside Santino and the Wedweil community since 2013 to build what is now a successful and growing program. We are recruiting for a new South Sudan Program Coordinator (see our website for details) and we are glad to say that Sue - who has been a key part of indigo foundation since 2003 - will continue on as a member of our Development Sub-Committee.

Finally, a huge congratulations to **Ali Reza Yunespour** and his wife Sughra who welcomed their daughter into the world in April.

# microfinance: is it really such a good thing?

*Dr Susan Engel, board member  
Senior Lecturer at the University of Wollongong*

Did you see Muhammad Yunus on Q&A on 3 April? Yunus was the founder of the Grameen Bank he and the Bank jointly won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2006 for their work on microcredit. Maybe you have wondered why indigo foundation has not taken up microfinance? After all, it claims to be an incredibly powerful tool for the empowerment of women, which is one of our key focus areas. Like many things though, when you scratch the surface, microcredit is not all it is made out to be.

Let's go back a little and look at what microcredit is and how it works. Microcredit is simply the provision of very small loans to the poor who have not been able to access traditional banking channels. Microfinance is now the more common term as it illustrates that many institutions now provide a range of services such as savings and insurance.

The estimates of the number of microfinance institutions (MFIs) across the world vary widely: there are at minimum over 1,000 institutions serving 130 million clients (Microfinance Barometer 2016). Some estimates say there are over 10,000 institutions - maybe well-over. As the industry has grown, it has become more commercialised and now NGOs are only responsible for servicing about 35 per cent of clients, with 60 per cent serviced by banks and finance firms and the rest by credit unions and rural banks (MacFarquhar, 2010). In the past decade, MFIs have started opening in developed countries.

## how microfinance works

Microcredit has a long history but providing it as a strategy for the empowering poor is often credited to Ela Bhatt in India in 1974 and Mohammad Yunus in Bangladesh in 1976. Both were responding to economic and institutional conditions limiting the productive potential of skilled artisans. Artisan and most poor people,



MUHAMMAD YUNUS

reserves for large expenses such as investment in an enterprise, medical expenses or investment in education. Often they do not save - sometimes because they cannot open traditional accounts requiring proof of identity and signatures or because there are no financial institutions in their area. Therefore, when they need credit, the poor use informal channels and this often means local money lenders, who generally charge exorbitant rates (Robinson, 2001).

Microcredit was designed to offer poor people an alternative source of small loans at more manageable interest rates than the money lenders. There are a range of models for providing microcredit. The most common model sees the formation of small groups of around five people, who initially make regular savings deposits into the scheme for a period of three to six months. This is the group collateral - the substitute for collateral normally required by financial institutions. Next, one or two members of the group can take out loans, the stated purpose of which must be creating or expanding a microenterprise. If loans are repaid, other group members become eligible. This system has produced very high repayment rates for most schemes.

## the limitations of microfinance

There are many dramatic claims regarding the benefits of microcredit, these are summarised

by Irish rock star Bono statement: 'Give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. Give a woman microcredit, she, her husband, her children, and her extended family will eat for a lifetime' (quoted in Bateman, 2014). Proponents support this claim by pointing to the 97 per cent repayment rate of loans, which seems to show both that poor women are bankable and that MFIs can be self-sustaining. If the poor can lend their way out of poverty then this provides a pathway for the end of aid and a justification for not providing social transfers to the poorest.

But would it surprise you to learn that the 97 per cent repayment rate comes at a cost? Perhaps not when you consider two things:

- Globally rates of small business failures are very high, further the creation of thousands of new small business creates hyper-competition pushing prices down to unsustainable levels, it simply adds new supply in markets with limited demand (Bateman, 2014); and
- The interest rates on microfinance are very high - the global average is 37 per cent per annum but in Mexico it is 70 per cent and there are reports of institutions charging 125 per cent (MacFarquhar, 2010). This is because MFI running costs are high both due to the lending model and the high salaries of top officials (Bateman, 2014). Thus it seems that the industry that it is becoming little better than the local money-sharks they sought to replace.

The transformative agenda for women is also not all that it is cracked up to be:

- In many case, husbands actually control the loans but often expect their wives to repay them.
- Where women do set up small businesses this adds to their high workload. Their changed role in the family sometimes puts a strain on marriages and many instances of domestic violence linked to microfinance have been reported.
- In Bangladesh and other countries, the vast majority of field officers in microfinance organisations are men and

women generally are not involved in the planning, implementation or evaluation of these organisations (Fernando, 1997).

Microfinance loans are not always or, in fact, mostly used for starting up small business, something the industry has over time acknowledged. Often loans are used for household needs such as medical or educational expenses. Many poor people become reliant on a cycle of loans - taking out a new loan to repay the last one (Fernando, 1997).

While the group collateral system produces high levels of repayments, it also institutionalises a range of pressure tactics to ensure repayments are made. Indeed, Karim (2011) describes microfinance as an economy of shame. The shame economy works through the lending group, group leaders and MF officers, it gets poor women to police each other, notify managers of defaults or problems and evict probable defaulters from the group. The group actively shame defaulters and MFI officials demand that the borrowing group publicly shame the defaulter - in part because they often end up paying for it out of their own wages if the defaulter does not to pay. In Karim's (2011) study in Bangladesh, 75 per cent of the women she interviewed outlined low level verbal and physical abuse associated with loan recovery from group members, NGO workers and husbands. Other coercive behaviours to get loan repayments included:

- threatening to throw hot water on the face of a defaulter;
- confiscating housing items include cooking utensils until repayment is made meaning defaulters cannot feed their family;
- household goods being taken and sold to pay debts one woman was forced to sell her house for US\$2.70;
- defaulters locked up in MFI offices overnight;
- taking court action against, and jailing of, defaulters, and;
- Karim discussed one case of suicide very closely linked to MF debt but in India there have been hundreds of cases.

# marketing and fundraising

Microfinance programs are not the panacea to global poverty as has been claimed. They do not eliminate the need for basic social and infrastructure services, end vulnerability to economic shocks, or even create many economic opportunities for the poor. The main impact of microfinance has been to dramatically increase individual indebtedness with many harmful consequences.

*Susan is an indigo foundation volunteer and board member. She is also a Senior Lecturer in Politics & International Studies at the University of Wollongong. She can be reached at email: [sengel@uow.edu.au](mailto:sengel@uow.edu.au) or twitter: [@susanengel\\_uow](https://twitter.com/susanengel_uow).*

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*Bianca Crocker, board member*

Our new marketing and fundraising strategy was finalised at the end of 2016. The focus of the strategy is to generate a steadily growing and predictable income that can support our strategic direction over the next five years. By ensuring our own stability and consistency, this will allow us to provide our partners with funding certainty, a critical element in successful long term community development.

To drive this strategy, we established a marketing and fundraising committee. Five supporters, Jemma and I, meet regularly to plan and deliver key initiatives. If you're looking for a way to get more involved with us, and this is of interest to you, we would love to hear from you.

## in the community

We could not do what we do, without a team of fantastic fundraising volunteers, a generous and committed community of supporters and individuals who give their time and profile to help us in our fundraising efforts.

**Our warmest thanks go to: Nasima Rahmani, Verity Firth, Elaine Crombie** for their brilliant support of our **International Women's Day Sydney dinner** in March. Nasima spoke of her work in Afghanistan on women's economic and education empowerment, Elaine sang beautiful and uplifting songs and Verity MC'ed the evening with warmth and humour. The dinner was held at the Moore Park Golf Club, who once again generously supported us with discounted costs, excellent delivery of service and wonderful food from Etiquette Catering. Thank you also to the great team of indigo foundation volunteers - **Louise Coutts, Ingrid Radford, Supipi Jayawardena, Cressida Hall** and **Susan Engel** as well as our very generous donors of raffle and auction prizes. It was a wonderful evening, not least because we raised a record of over \$20,000!

**Robin Brown and the indigo champions (Allan Asher, Ben Loudon, David Clarke,**



**Ian Robinson, Rick Arthur, Rod James, Anna Garnock, Gillian Riches, Viv Ellis, Karin Laird and the support crew Lois Asher and David Wheen**) who once again undertook a grueling ride from sea level in Sydney to the summit of Mt Kosciuszko to raise funds for women's empowerment - this time highlighting the work of project partner, Club Rafiki, in Kigali Rwanda. The fundraising target of \$9,498 - one dollar for every vertical metre climbed - was smashed with a total of almost \$13,000! Thank you to the dedicated Sea to Summit riders and all those who supported them.

## save the date: join us in these upcoming events!

### a winter banquet in melbourne

As the cold weather approaches we invite you to join us for a warm winter banquet in Melbourne. On Friday 2nd June, we will be hosting a dinner at the Queen Victoria Women's Centre highlighting our connections with refugees and through these relationships, our community development work in Afghanistan and South Sudan.

Guests will hear from South Sudan project advisor Santino Yuot, a former refugee, as he shares a first-hand account of our work in Wedweil and the political context in South Sudan. The Chair of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, Helen Kapalos, will share her passion about supporting Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse communities and the wonderful Genevieve Morris will MC the evening.

For more information and to buy tickets click here. <http://indigowinterbanquet.floktu.com/>

### australian tour by Dr Sima Samar

In late May, we are thrilled to be hosting a visit by Dr Sima Samar, in conjunction with UTS, and supported by the University of Wollongong. Dr Samar Simar is the Independent Chair of the Afghan Human Rights Commission and the founder of the Gawarshad Institute of Higher Education in Kabul, where our partner, the Women's Empowerment Centre, is based.

In 1984, the communist regime arrested her husband, and Sima and her young son fled to neighboring Pakistan. Distressed by the total lack of health care facilities for Afghan refugee women, she established in 1989 the Shuhada Organization and Shuhada Clinic in Quetta, Pakistan. The Shuhada Organization was dedicated to the provision of health care to Afghan women and girls, training of medical staff and to education. In the following years further branches of the clinic/hospital were opened throughout Afghanistan.

\*\* Thank you to all those who have asked guests to their birthday or special events to donate to us in lieu of a gift - we do not underestimate such thoughtfulness and generosity. \*\*

After living as refugee for over a decade, Samar returned to Afghanistan in 2002 to assume a cabinet post in the Afghan Transitional Administration led by Hamid Karzai. In the interim government, she served as Deputy President and then as Minister for Women's Affairs. She was forced into resignation from her post after she was threatened with death and harassed for questioning conservative Islamic laws, especially sharia law. During the 2003 Loya Jirga, several religious conservatives took out an advertisement in a local newspaper calling Samar the Salman Rushdie of Afghanistan.

Dr Samar will visit Canberra, Wollongong and Sydney, present public lectures on human rights and women and girls education in Afghanistan, as well as speak at indigo foundation supporter events. We'll be in touch by email with more details and if you would like a chance to hear more about Dr Samar's work, contact Jemma on [jemma.bailey@indigofoundation.org](mailto:jemma.bailey@indigofoundation.org).

### **2017 travel raffle**

Tickets are now on sale so get in quickly and start planning your dream holiday. First prize is a \$5000 travel voucher and second prize is two nights accommodation for four people in the Hunter Valley. Tickets are \$25 each and only 800 tickets have been printed. To buy tickets online, visit here <https://www.indigofoundation.org/raffle>

### **wollongong music trivia night**

Last year we had a fantastic night with 450 people - lets go for 500 this year and have another brilliant night of dancing and fun. Details to come, watch out on facebook or your inbox

### **7th annual canberra dinner**

This time on 21 October at the Abortorium with guest speaker Nani Zulminarni about the impressive work of PEKKA - empowering women headed households in Indonesia. PEKKA works with 430 grassroots organisations of poor women head of households in Indonesia to empower and build collective power of the women head of households to gain better life, justice and dignity.

