GLOCAL ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER #4

GLOCAL CAREERS

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Interviewee: **Mashiyat Rahman, founder of Resurgence**
Interview by: **Lía Barrese**

August 2020, Barcelona

Hello Mashiyat. Could you please introduce yourself and how you got to be a social entrepreneur.

Il am Mashiyat Rahman and I'm in cohort two of Glocal. I am a social entrepreneur, although right now I'm getting more into urban geography. I started Resurgence Bangladesh three years ago with three of my friends, and it's basically a social enterprise that produces low cost, biodegradable sanitary pads for women in low income communities in Bangladesh. We make our pads with water-hyacinth, which is the most invasive water plant in the world. So we basically try to tackle two problems at once: the environmental problems caused by water-hyacinth, and making pads available to women in low income communities.

What made you found an organization, and why this one?

I was researching for my anthropology class on menstruation knowledge in low income communities and how women face it. Their results really made me think a lot and realize I just couldn't limit my work to a research project. At the same time, there was a social business competition coming up in my university. So I pitched the idea to my classmates and we researched for a couple of weeks. We tried different products, we experimented. Then we found out that we could do it through water-hyacinth because the pulp of the plant can be used as like cotton fibers, but it's completely biodegradable and there's no plastic involved. We won the university competition and we went to present our idea in Shanghai. We ended up networking with a lot of people and we got investments and that's how we started our company.

Specifically, what type of social impact does your business seek to create?

We work having identified four kinds of social impacts. Firstly, to de-stigmatize periods. In a country like Bangladesh, there is a whole social stigma and taboo around menstruation, reproductive health, and sexual knowledge. So we've run campaigns, we've run programs, we've run ads just to bring knowledge. We even made games and arranged for the topic to be included in schools curriculums.

Secondly, we make pads available to women. Most low income women are supporting their families and they don't really consider period pads as a necessity as pads are taxed as luxury goods. So we wanted to make the pads accessible for women in a way that was not only affordable, but also easy to dispose of. In the context of low income communities that live in urban slums or in villages, they can just bury our pads and it just works as well as compost.

The third is the environmental issue of the water-hyacinth. In Bangladesh and many other parts of the world this is a very invasive plant: it clogs water bodies, it reduces the level of oxygen for other animals living in the lakes. The Bangladesh government spends thousands of dollars in trying to get rid of the water-hyacinth. We basically can get to the product for free, and that makes it even more affordable for us to produce, and lowers the price we sell it for.

Fourthly, we've employed women from these low income communities in our processes, so that they're the ones making the pads. Engaging them with a bottom up approach has made them feel more connected. We also train these women as community leaders able to go and talk about the benefit of using pads and reproductive health, and they are naturally better received by their peers. Thus far, our pads have reached at least 7,000 women.

What are the biggest challenges your organization has faced, and how was your experience as being a female entrepreneur?

First we faced bureaucratic challenges. In a developing country like mine, obviously there's a lot of bureaucracy: we had to go through different levels of people to just get permission to have a factory to getting registered and to be set as a proper company; also, to have access to slums we had to first talk with their leaders. This challenge made us realized the need to pull all the networks we had and try to find people who could help us really reach people, because we didn't want to do it on the surface.

Second, as a woman entrepreneur, it's very hard to be taken seriously. Even my relatives were not taking me seriously. They thought I was doing a school project. It's hard being taken seriously as a young woman in the eyes of bureaucrats or in the eyes of policymakers - we have to go through a lot of these lines since we're working in the health sector. So we had to include a man in the team. He became the face in terms of administrative work, because otherwise we would not have been considered. That's the truth.

What advice would you give to others looking to start up a third sector organization (specially GLOCALS)?

The best thing right now is that due to the popularity of sustainable development goals, there's a lot of hackathons, a lot of social enterprise competitions, and a lot of knowledge exchange, even despite COVID. My first advice would be to get involved in these things. Even if you're not participating in a competition your biggest asset is networking. You'll meet a lot of likeminded people or people who are willing to work on similar projects, willing to invest, or just willing to give you advice or mentorship. And that really matters! For our social enterprise, if we hadn't gone to Shanghai and gotten the advice and the mentorship and the investment opportunities that we got, I don't think we could have come as far as we did.

Regarding this, I took every opportunity I had. Like going to Sweden and talking with the prime minister of Sweden because of Resurgence. The best thing about Glocal is

that it opens up your mind a lot to what's happening in the world. It gives you a lot of cultural awareness and sensitivity and people appreciate that a lot.

What is the future of your enterprise and of yourself as a entrepreneur?

During COVID times we haven't been able to produce. We can't honestly ensure that the working places can meet the health standards of social distancing in a production company like ours. Also, our company is very community based and we couldn't get engaged. On top of that it's a very difficult time because I'm handling my thesis, and my other team members are also doing their masters or their jobs. But I know Resurgence has a future as it is a very marketable product.

Regarding myself, I've always been a very entrepreneurial person. Currently, I am helping a friend in Barcelona with a new social project called Local X Local aimed at supporting local commerce. So I think I will be in the enterprising field and of course we are going to continue with Resurgence even if we're not producing pads directly, because it's not about selling a product but the social impact it comes with the knowledge we intend to share. Our focus will always be on making as much social impact as possible, no matter what the global business climate is.

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Links

Interviewee: **Liliana Parra, founder of masuno.app**
Interview by: **Laura Murcia**

August 2020, Colombia

Could you please introduce yourself and how you came to be a social entrepreneur?

My name is Liliana Parra. I'm a social entrepreneur and founder of masuno.app. I'm passionate about connecting people, using design and technology for good, and bringing bold ideas to life.

In 2012, I founded Fluyt, a communications and design studio based in Bogotá, Colombia, and in March 2020 I launched masuno.app -plus one, in Spanish- a virtual help desk that's connecting people in need with professionals, from different backgrounds, who want to donate their time to support their communities amid the pandemic.

What made you found an organization, and why this one?

On March 20th, 2020, I listened to a BBC podcast where a frontline doctor described how it was like inside an intensive care unit in Manchester, UK. I was depressed and paralyzed by fear. Two days later, I had an 'aha' moment that led me to decide that my experience could somehow be useful to support others during the pandemic. By then, COVID-19 was not yet a big issue in Colombia, but we knew it would be quite severe. So we gathered a core team together and started working on masuno.app right-away.

Masuno leverages the power of collaboration utilizing one of the most robust technologies for client relations management in the world—Zendesk. We asked ourselves: What if people could access a helpdesk operated by volunteers that worked just as well as the customer service hotline of a top tech startup? And so we got in touch with Zendesk® to make it happen?

Specifically, what type of social impact does your business seek to create?

Masuno works at two levels. First, we have a knowledge base of over 500 articles curated by volunteers. We aim to centralize and disseminate high-quality information that can help people make better decisions and practice self-care. Also, we have set-up a Whatsapp channel and chatbot to capture requests from the public. We work with our volunteers to help find solutions and answers to common questions and problems. Our site has more than 3.5K visits monthly.

Also, Masuno has put together a team of six psychologists volunteering to provide mental health support. We offer free consultations to people who struggle during the pandemic and cannot afford private mental health services. So far, we've supported more than 60 persons,with these services and many of them have received more than one session.

What are the biggest challenges your organization has faced, and how have you overcome them?

We have faced numerous challenges. Coordinating a team of more than 50 volunteers virtually, who have never worked together before has been, surprisingly, the least of our problems. We have tried to set-up a few free services, but regulatory issues usually come in the way. When it comes to social impact, innovating comes with great legal responsibility. We also found that it's challenging to operate as a collective and not a legal entity.

Finally, lack of funding and relying exclusively on in-kind donations have made it difficult for us to set-up a full-time core team to better support our routine operations.

What advice would you give to others looking to start an organisation which addresses social issues?

I'd encourage you to surround yourself with talented and driven people who can help you through the ups and downs of entrepreneurship. The journey is inspiring, but it takes a toll on you. So having a support network or team is essential. Besides, don't get frustrated if funding doesn't come as soon as you'd like to. Build a light, cost-effective structure at the beginning, bounce, and test ideas, and don't be too hard on yourself when/if they don't take off. Try to focus on the problem, and the change you want to see rather than your idea or solution.

Where do you see your business going in the future?

We want to see Masuno.app thrive beyond the pandemic—this is a fantastic moment to provide a gateway for people to connect around causes to support communities in harnessing remote collaboration and the assets in the community. We'd love to continue providing a service to our users in a sustainable way and expand our portfolio of services from mental health to other services like free legal advice or support to senior adults.

"I'd encourage you to surround yourself with talented and driven people who can help you through the ups and downs of entrepreneurship. The journey is inspiring, but it takes a toll on you.".

Links

Fluyt Masuno

Could you please introduce yourself and how you came to be a social entrepreneur?

I was born in a poor family, and my parents could not afford to have me go to school. All three of my siblings had to drop out of school to start working at the age of 16-17 years old. My dream was always to be an entrepreneur because I thought that it was the only way to make a living and to show my parents that they raised me to be very hardworking. When I was studying, I was also working at the same time, but I thrived to finish my master's degree in 2016.

My first paid job was working with Destiny Rescue, an anti-human trafficking NGO as a reintegration specialist. I worked directly with target groups between the age of 14-18 years old. There were many cases and a high turnover rate because victims would run away back to the workplaces where they came from (for example bars and clubs). They had no other way of earning enough money to pay back their family's debt, since good jobs didn't pay enough money for them. Therefore, in my dream, I hoped to run a business to create jobs which are fairly paid and provide good working condition for people.

I later moved on to work with another NGO which works directly with anti-human trafficking in field vocational training as a production manager. I worked directly with handicraft producers for 3 years. By working with them every day, I came to learn about their continuous complaints about the struggle of market access due to their lack of education and digital marketing skills; they rely on 1-3 orders from overseas a year, which is often not large enough to be able to support their business and family.

What made you found an organisation and why this one? Specifically, what type of social impact does your business seek to create?

While working for Destiny Rescue, I met Bouyky Seng (Co-Founder) who was then working as an HR Coordinator. She had a hard time buying gifts for staff and would reach out to me to help to look for more gifts. This collaboration led us to discover a gap in the handicrafts market, so we started SEPAK to help handicraft producer sell their products and to give households enough income to support their families, in turn, reducing immigration to other provinces or countries.

Interviewee:
Kanika, founder of SEPAK

Interview by:
Anne Heslinga

A Khmer handicrafts online platform that bring handicrafts makers and customers together to find the real local made products.

August 2020, Cambodia

What are the biggest challenges your business has faced and how have you over come them?

I can say my parents support the idea behind my business, but they still have the concerns because I'm not like other entrepreneurs who have fallback money from their family. When I was working in reintegration, I would give my family extra money, but I reduced this amount and also sold my motorbike in order to run my business. It's a cultural norm, some people around me they disagree with me that I had left my sustainable job to run this business because they can see I don't have money anymore they want me to paid every month instead of starving myself for small online business. Instead of listening to their concerns and complaints, I looked for support in my community. I joined different support programs for both mental and business support.

What advice would you give to others looking to start an organisation which address social issues?

My advice to others who are looking to have a start-up is to spend your time with different industries and find which one you like the most, figuring out what people's real need are and whether you can help them through your business. When you see the impact of your work, you will have the courage to carry on. Even if the business is small, it will fill your heart with joy.

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Where do you see your business going in the future? / What is the future of this sector, particularly in these difficult times?

Cambodia is lucky because we are not affected directly from Covid-19, however, many production factories are closed due to lack of orders. We try our best to help the producers as much as we can to give them enough orders, to make sure they have money to buy their food and pay for living expenses. When we are through this crisis, I hope to see Cambodia's products sold world-wide, so that the number of handicraft producers immigrating to other country decreases, and, most importantly, so that Cambodia can supply its own goods and occupy a central place in global supply chains. That would be my dream.