



WRC Case Study: Social Enterprise

Interview with Anjum Ishtaq - Training and production manager and Anne Wilding - Coordinator Heba Women's Project

2009

Background

Eighteen years ago the SSBA, a community business, raised a small European Social Fund (ESF) grant through Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM). It used one of its workspaces to help local Bangladeshi women meet together, learn English and explore skills to help them earn some money of their own.

For many years, the project operated without a name (to stop the men taking over). It was only named when the women had to fight for funding that was being blocked by men on the Board of Bethnal Green City Challenge (BGCC). They persuaded BGCC to set up a project to teach English to local women which developed into a major English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programme now run by Tower Hamlets College and Council.

In 1996, the SSBA set up the SSBA Community Trust to take over responsibility for funding and managing Heba and another of its training and enterprise projects for people with learning difficulties, 'Poetry in Wood'. As part of a registered charity, the two projects had the autonomy to fund raise and operate as separate projects, whilst also having the security and support of the parent body as and when necessary.

Overview of project

'Heba' means women's talent in Arabic, which is exactly what the project does: it provides women from diverse backgrounds with a welcoming and friendly environment to develop new skills and design ideas.

Based above a shop in Brick Lane, the project has 2 main programmes:

Training: accredited courses in English, sewing and garment production and IT
Social enterprise: works with new designers to develop and produce their designs. Some are sold in the shops and markets.

A small number of subsidised work spaces are available for women who want to try out their ideas and start up in business.

Social Enterprise

Local designers contact Heba with their design ideas. Many of the designers need support such as sewing technique and financial management. One of Heba's strengths is its ability to be flexible and meet the needs of designers, whatever stage they are at. Women in the sewing classes develop their skills through producing the designers' products. Depending on their skill level, they will work on straightforward or more complex tasks.

They are now beginning to produce their own HEBA products, starting with a range of baby accessories, which will be sold in a new shop in Toynbee Street. The shop (still to be named) will sell both Heba and Poetry in Woods Products. By increasing their sales, Heba hopes to earn a greater proportion of its income.

Keys to success

1. Diversifying Funding

When asked whether they thought Heba is sustainable, Anne replied, "Well we've survived for 18 years!" and Anjum adds, "and that included one year when we suddenly lost our main grant from Tower Hamlets College". Heba currently receives grants to cover the cost of providing English, sewing and computing lessons.

On the enterprise side, an important achievement over the past year has been **doubling the amount of income** generated by charging designers to make their products. Having a number of different sources of income has certainly made them stronger, particularly as the funding situation is changing and the economic climate difficult. "It can be dangerous to go down only one road," says Anne. "It's also important to make contact with a variety of funders.

2. Understanding women and their needs

The fact that Heba is a women only space is crucial. Anne explains, "For me in the classroom, it's completely different...that element of one upmanship is gone."

Women's individual needs are catered for and Heba's programmes are determined by the women themselves.

The crèche is also essential. Dedicated crèche workers provide high quality care, which is beneficial for the children's development and allows women to relax in the knowledge that their children are happy.

Summary of lessons learnt

1. Diversify your funding

This case study illustrates how effective it is for long term sustainability not to rely on one form of funding. Search around for a variety of funding opportunities. Think about what your organisation has to offer. Heba was able to provide skills that their participants had in order to gain income.

2. Treat funders well

As Anne points out, "If you do get funding for a small project, make sure you meet deadlines, send them reports and photos and invite them to visit. If they like what they see, it can lead to bigger projects later." However, don't forget that this doesn't just mean the people who hand over the cash. A large part of Heba's success relies on the relationships with designers who pay for their work to be made. Effective relationships can be as important as successful bids for long term sustainability.

3. Be patient

When asked if they had any advice for other organisations, Anjum immediately responds, "Be patient! Don't do everything for money. The work has to be your passion. My sense of achievement comes from seeing someone getting some money for the work she's done. The smile, the satisfaction on her face – that pays me everything!" She also emphasises that, "the quality is important – you can't play with other people's things, it takes time."

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