

There is always a Road behind the Mountain – a Story of eHomemakers’ Resource Mobilization Journey

A famous Chinese proverb from the warlord days of ancient China – “when your horse is dead, walk to your destination” – aptly describes eHomemakers’ (eH) survival path over the last ten years since its inception. Due to precarious local and international situations affecting its work, eH has not been able to find any core funding. Resource constraints have created several barriers for eH, hampering its growth potential and at several times, almost causing the network to close down.

However, despite these financial barriers, eH has managed to create a variety of resources and used them efficiently to grow from a voluntary mothers’ group into a social enterprise with 15,000 members (as of the present time), encompassing disadvantaged women and men, who need to work @ home or are working @ home.

Sustaining this would not have been possible without the core team’s tenacity, a strong belief in the organization’s mission and, the will to create solutions when there were none.



Chong Sheau Ching

Chong Sheau Ching has graduated from Canada and the US, with two Bachelors’ degrees in Agriculture and Home Economics, majoring in food and nutrition. She also has a Master’s in International Administration. Her fourteen years’ experience with international organizations in policy planning, programming, management and training has given her extensive knowledge on social issues, grassroots empowerment and cross-cultural communication. She has founded a community network of women who work from home, ‘Mothers for Mothers/ eHomemakers’. Sheau Ching is presently heading a community trilingual portal ‘www.ehomemakers.net’ that has an e-membership of 13,000 people. She was awarded the 2003 Women in Electronic Network Training Award (WENT Award) at the World Summit for Information Society, Geneva, Switzerland by APC (Association of Progressive Communication Network) and Sookmyung Women’s University, South Korea, for founding the working @ home network and building it into a vibrant community. She is also an active contributing member of several international women in ICT networks. She has authored ‘Stories for My Mother’; co-authored and edited ‘Working @ Home - A Guidebook for Working Women and Homemakers’, and written papers in several management publications. Sheau Ching is a single mother with a home office. She takes care of her 13- year old daughter, a Down Syndrome brother, who had just past away and her 76-year old parents.

About eHomemakers

General membership

eH was formed in 1998 as an informal mothers' group, 'Mothers for Mothers', with a core team of volunteer organizers. Its aim was to help mothers to work @ home to balance home and work life. In 2002, it became a social enterprise with an active e-community and was renamed 'eHomemakers'.

eH is now Malaysia's only community network that promotes working from home, teleworking and the running of SOHO (small office home office) businesses through the use of Information & Communication Technology (ICT). Our e-community promotes self-help, telework, business partnerships and homepreneurship (home based entrepreneurship) development. eH has managed to bring middle to lower middle-class women homemakers, with low self-esteem in the digital divide group into the ICT age. Some of these women are single moms (separated, divorced or abandoned) and abuse victims while a majority are married mothers. Membership is free to give everyone who needs help equal access to eH's information resources. Information dissemination, networking, teletrading and mutual support is enabled through the portal, www.ehomemakers.net, a monthly e-newsletter, and a quarterly printed newsletter, 'Home+Work'. The frequency of conferences, seminars and SOHO business exhibitions depends on corporate sponsorship and partnership. An annual mother's day celebration recognizes 'model mothers' from different groups.

eH also tirelessly and patiently advocates the inclusion of the homeworking sector into the formal economy to uplift the legal status of homeworkers, and raises awareness on the plight of urban poor homeworkers who have been long neglected and left out of assistance. The advocacy is done through article writing, speaking, research, and face-to-face meetings.

Vulnerable members

To address the needs of urban poor, disadvantaged and unemployed women, eH started a pilot project in 2002, 'Salaam Wanita' (SW). The SW community consists of a group of women in the Klang Valley (in the centre of Peninsular Malaysia) and Ipoh (a city in the north), who have been left out of official assistance due to various reasons. Members include single mothers, disabled women, patients of chronic illnesses, and women with disabled dependents or dependants with chronic illnesses. SW members are mostly homebound because of physical disabilities and family commitments.

Urban poor women receive long-term, end-to-end solutions to get out of poverty and empower themselves through this project. While training the women to embark upon appropriate income-generation activities so that they can be financially and emotionally independent, middle class members of eH are requested to make donations and provide voluntary help to support these women. The organization markets selected products such as the eco-baskets (see www.justmarketing.info); assists in product marketing for others besides soliciting flexi-work or home based work for those who have been trained in basic computers and mobile phones under the Home based Administrative Assistant Program (HAA). Due to resource constraints, eH can only help 300 disadvantaged women at a time. Women who have achieved self-reliance 'graduate' from the SW project and are invited into the general eH membership so that they become part of the resource pool to help other SW members. New members replace those who have graduated to form a total group of 300. The SW project has become the component where eH culls its social profit.

Sources of resources

eHomemakers' resource mobilization effort has been crucial to its survival as it does not receive any core funding since its inception ten years ago. Resources have been generated through different ways and used for various purposes through the last ten years. The size of contributions depends on the program needs, human resources available and the changing situations within the RM context, as eH balances the requirements of meeting members' needs and the need to render long-term help to SW women. Table 1 illustrates the financial resources eH gathers to maintain the network, implement activities, conduct research for advocacy, and help SW members.

Volunteers, bartering and exchange

“The less one spends, the less headache one has” – this has been the golden rule that forms the basis of how eH has done its programming. The core eH volunteers were mindful of cash expenses from the start. They used phones and email heavily to reduce telecommunication and transportation expenses in organizing various activities. Those who could afford to make small cash donations or give goods in kind helped single moms who faced financial constraints.

During the first few years of its inception, in order to implement its ‘Mothers for Mothers’ working @ home conferences to disseminate information in Kuala Lumpur and Penang (two largest cities in Malaysia), eH volunteers organized activities by using the only way that ‘housewives’ know to get things done without cash involvement – bartering. It bartered services such as graphic design, printing and call answering with small businesses. Publicity was given to those who bartered through exhibition booths at events and flyers in participant folders.

eH also projected its activity participants as customers to hotels (which gave complimentary or partially subsidized venues), and as consumers, to several milk and baby product multinationals (which gave hampers of their goods to speakers and key homemaker volunteers). The companies' logos, slogans and information about their goods and services were inserted in flyers, training folders, and event backdrops at different levels of visibility depending on the value of the goods they gave. In addition, the businesses wooed the Founder / Executive Director of eH, who was also a popular newspaper columnist, to endorse their businesses in her media network.

Table 1: Resource Mobilization (1998-2007) for eH Activities

Year	Volunteers	Earned Income	Corporate Sponsorship	Government	External Funders	Bartering	Donations
1998-2001	(38%) <i>(20%)</i>	(10%)	(40%)		2%	(10%)	<i>(80%)</i>
2002-03	2% <i>(20%)</i>	9%	17%	70%		2%	<i>(80%)</i>
Mid 03- mid 06	<i>(20%)</i>	20%	30%		40%	5%	5% <i>(80%)</i>
Mid 06- 07	10% <i>(20%)</i>	30% <i>(20%)</i>	40%		10%	10%	<i>(60%)</i>

Notes:

% = estimate of cash value in relation to the overall cash value of total resources required

Italicized font in this table represents resources for SW women

Earned Income - Cash from advertising revenue to website and newsletters, members' payment for seminars and conferences, fees earned through consultancy, book sales

Corporate Sponsorship - Cash and/ or goods

Government - Grant

External Funders - Grant, Award grant

Bartering – exchanges with small businesses for services required in the form of publicity in eH publications and events; and endorsement from eH, exchanging corporate goods for volunteers' expenses

Donation - from members supporters of eH

Project-based cash sponsorship

2000-2001 saw the production and printing of the 'Working @ Home' book in four languages – English, Bahasa, Tamil and Chinese. Although the writers were volunteers, there was no way any printing companies were going to barter with the group for their services. They wanted hard cash. The group learnt a new lesson – “No money no talk.”

The four language books, 20,000 copies in total, were printed one by one as cash sponsorships were secured from CIDA; a multinational; a dotcom; AusAid; and a cash advertisement from a small company. CIDA and AusAid were interested in gender development; the multinational wanted to project a forward-looking nurturing image to the mothers' community, while the dotcom was interested in the database of women who work @ home for its new women's portal. 17,000 copies were given to women's Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) for women who could not afford to pay for the books and the rest were distributed among the writers for their one-year effort. The remaining 3000 were sold to offset the administrative expenses incurred in the distribution to NGOs. This non-profit book project was the beginning of how eH would secure cash sponsorships from a variety of sources, to implement an activity with serious cash needs.

Earned income and government grants

Unable to cope with increasing demands from women for more information on how to work @ home especially those who were out of the Klang Valley, eH submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (MoSTE) for the newly launched DAG (Demonstrator Application Grant), focusing on the promotion of ICT in the country. The proposal was rejected several times due to the absence of patronage and institutional backing from women's NGOs to eH. Unfazed by these responses, eH rewrote the proposal after each rejection, making every new version more and more interactive and groundbreaking with new ideas on e-community building.

In 2002, eH finally received a one-year community grant to build an e-community of women homemakers through 'www.ehomemakers.net'. A team of 25 project staff were hired for technical and content development. 200 single moms under the Salaam Wanita (SW) project underwent computer training. Two research studies related to teleworking were conducted to give credence to eH's advocacy in the promotion of teleworking. The project staff raised an additional 30% funds required to achieve all its deliverables from various sources to complement the grant.

However, hotels were no longer willing to give complimentary or partially subsidized venues because of the grant. Small companies were also less willing to barter their services. They all wanted cash because of the DAG. The grant however did give credibility to eH as cash sponsorships from two multinationals were secured for conferences and the printed newsletter, 'Home+Work'.

Those who attended the conferences and seminars paid a small amount of fees as most of them were homemakers who were not earning own income. eH's fee-paying policy was set – get corporate sponsorships to subsidize events so that members, regardless of total household income, could afford to attend them. Sponsorship for poor women would be secured from more well-to-do members. eH believes that improving women's economic self-reliance is essential to the advancement of their gender status, as they would have more control over decision-making in their own lives.

External funders

After the grant period was over, the staff strength was reduced to 15. eH continued (until the present day) to operate with a small overhead cost, through its virtual office. The staff works from home using email, yahoo briefcases, MSN and Skype to reduce telecommunication and transport costs. The Executive Director's (ED) home is the headquarters, storing all the physical documents and hosting face-to-face meetings with the staff.

Between mid-2003 to mid 2006, eH won a small research grant from Pan Asia to study the barriers for disadvantaged women to enter e-entrepreneurship, and, then another small Research and Development (R&D) grant to build its first innovative integrated ICT application - DWMA (Distributed Work Management Application). The DWMA was conceived so that one staff member could coordinate 300 women in trainings and the work distribution of the eco-basket project instead of deploying six staff members. Expenses incurred on phone and transport was further reduced for the women and eH. An IDRC supported regional research grant on urban poor homeworkers also gave credibility to eH's advocacy with the government and allowed it to build its organizational reputation locally and outside the country.

These three grants stabilized the SW project as they gave credibility to eH to attract donations for its eco-basket training and facilitated the set-up of a web-based donation scheme – 'Network of Angels', for those who were in financial crisis. The start of a monthly e-newsletter for members facilitated their donations to the SW women. This was also the period when eH built its internal research and article writing capacity. More staff time was spent to build publicity through interviews and press releases about its projects. In 2005, www.justmarketing.info, the marketing website for eco-baskets and the disadvantaged women's products/ services, was built by two volunteers.

The general membership increased from 5000 after the grant, to over 10,000 members, even though eH didn't have funds for advertising and outreach. Yet this was not big enough to attract more advertising revenue for its portal. Realizing that the portal was not sustainable

and that there was no more cash for new content, eH bartered content with local writers and other overseas websites in exchange of publicity on the portal.

To further reduce staff costs, staff responsibility was consolidated to increase efficiency. Every staff member had to learn new IT skills and other specific skills on her own, to increase their multi-tasking ability. A few part-time homemakers were engaged to provide output based services such as management of online membership and registration of ground events. They were paid as per their output instead of being engaged as full-time staff working @ home. During this period, the virtual office procedures were improved for maximum staff efficiency.

The grants also enabled the research team to spend more time in ICT related conferences, serving as panel members and talking to anyone who would listen to urban poor homeworkers and homemakers' plights. Women's NGOs who used to shun eH were now more approachable because they were beginning to see the importance of eH's endeavour – helping women gain economic self-reliance. In November 2005, the Malaysian Government announced its support to the 'home-office' concept for all Malaysians, regardless of gender, after close to eight years' of advocacy by eH.

From mid 2006 to 2007, eH was not able to secure any grant from the government or any external organizations, which it now needed to achieve the following goals:

- i. train the HAA women on soft skills so that they could work in an innovative cyber-telecentre administered by eH;
- ii. improve its portal for interactivity to increase membership;
- iii. continue its various research activities such as mapping to advocate the government to include homeworking into the formal economic sector and help urban poor homeworkers.

eH strengthened its efforts to reach the business sector so that the work could continue at the momentum required.

Wooring the business sector

In 2006, eH won one of the 40 Microsoft UP grants it gave worldwide. eH trained 70 disadvantaged women on basic computers for a year while it appealed to companies and members to donate used computers. It was the e-newsletter called 'Friends of eHomemakers' sent to a group of 200 individuals sympathetic to disadvantaged women that yielded 26 brand new computers from a successful businessman who liked eH's message of self-reliance for the disadvantaged. Small companies donated some used computers, which eH sent for refurbishment by a local NGO before they were given to the women.

Since one-third of eH membership is now men, while the rest are mothers with young children, mothers with adult children and single women, eH wants to project a different image to the public – an e-community of serious teleworkers. It does not want to be associated with milk and baby product companies any more. So it began to foray into the ICT and general consumer sectors. Unfortunately, none of the teleworking and homepreneurship development projects that eH proposed to the potential donors was attractive enough for partnership. Neither were they interested in advertising on the eH portal nor its publications because of eH's small membership. They want to advertise only when the eH portal had several million hits or if the newsletters reached at least 40,000 members. eH also approached them for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to help disadvantaged women, but the effort was futile.

As a result of the lack of resources to implement more activities, eH's membership could not grow to 20,000 as expected. This creates a catch-22 situation. Without more members, eH cannot earn more income through advertising and ground events.

However, funds were raised from several companies including the multinational discussed earlier, for regular activities such as newsletters and updating of the portal. In order to survive, eH staff strength was reduced to six full-timers and a few project-based consultants while the web team bartered with writers for content and small companies for services. Summer interns from eH's new US partner – Advocacy Project – provided the needed technical input to assist in fixing the bugs on www.justmarketing.info and www.ehomemakers.net and, training the team in new communication techniques. The total value of resources raised during the 2006-07 period was the lowest since eH turned into a social enterprise in 2002.

Challenges

Founded as a completely voluntary grassroots network initially, non-cash contributions such as voluntary work and bartering with businesses sustained the network's activities in the first few years. When the activities could not meet the growing membership's needs, eH was converted into a social enterprise so that funds could be raised to sustain the growing demands. Although eH has been successful in carrying out activities through a creative usage of a mix of resources, it has not received any core funding. There are six key reasons for this:

Old name, old message

In 1998, eH was founded as 'Mothers for Mothers' in the midst of the Asian Economic Crisis. Countless of homemakers found themselves as the sole bread-earners through home-based income-earning avenues such as catering, cake-making and tuition because their husbands had been retrenched. eH's message to them was – "help yourself by working from home so you don't cry." It was a powerful message that spread like fire, helping women to look within the home for resources to carry the family through. Other groups of women such as single moms began to notice the working @ home option as well.

The first few activities were community conferences for homemakers and single moms. Without any cash, the organizing group had to barter with businesses for goods to offset heavy cash expenses. The only businesses willing to barter with such an unusual informal group were the milk and baby products companies, which were grappling with their own budget cuts in advertising. They found the bartering – giving products for sampling in exchange of publicity – an acceptable 'advertising' avenue. It was a win-win solution that Mothers for Mothers had carried on for several years until 2006 without realizing that the 'mother' and 'single moms' connotation would actually hurt the broader resource mobilization effort, i.e., no other funds could be raised from other parties locally because they did not want to be associated with 'mothers' and 'single moms'. eH has not been able to shed the 'mother' image until date.

On the other hand, women's NGOs with mother beneficiaries boycotted eH because it received sponsorship from the multinational, which was in the midst of an international mother's boycott due to its past marketing effort in the 1970s.

Wrong name, wrong time

In 1998-1999, Malaysia experienced an unprecedented social unrest. The government was wary of NGOs that had long been associated with the anti-government and pro-human rights

camp. Government agencies were also wary of any NGOs that it did not fund or endorse and any organization with the potential of leading mass people movement. The core group of eH tried to apply for NGO status because of the unprecedented demands from women for information on working @ home. It however stopped to seek NGO status due to unwanted enquiries, and registered itself under the 'Registrar of Business.'

As such, the path for what eH could or could not get locally in terms of resources was set. Since it could not be an NGO, it is not entitled to any government funding allocated for NGOs. Since it is not a *bumi*-owned company, (Malaysia's New Economic Policy denotes that government-business contracts are privileged to the indigenous people), it also can't get contracts to do research or poverty alleviation projects without going through *bumi*-owned companies as third parties, which take sizable commissions from the contracts without putting in any effort. At several times, eH was not paid for services rendered and it had nowhere to file any complaints.

Prejudice against vulnerable groups of women

eH's networking and RM effort in the early years was met with heavy ridicule, disbelief and sarcasm due to the lack of understanding of the plight of women in the country. In the local history of social movements, there has been a women's movement in general but not much has been done for 'mothers' (except by breastfeeding groups) and none for 'housewives' or women homeworkers. Even today these women are still seen in negative light – uneducated women who can't contribute to the society due to low or no skills; lowly paid maids/ cleaning women; homeworkers with odd jobs to kill time; and housewives with nothing to do and plenty of time to waste. Few realize that housewives have low self-esteem and they have been in the assistance gaps for decades, especially the disadvantaged women who are homebound.

Even after 'Mothers for Mothers' was given a new name – 'eHomemakers' – in 2002, the prejudices against the organization were still prevalent among women's NGOs and the government sector. As a result of the lack of local support in the early years of eH's existence by those who were expected to render help, eH was denied crucial RM advice, networking opportunities and voluntary support. eH's membership grew in spurts, increasing in numbers every time it managed to gather resources to organize a big conference.

eH finds that the male dominated business sector (except the baby, food, beauty and weight loss industry) where it is seeking support for CSR and consumer partnership does not favour women consumers, let alone 'housewives'. If there is any CSR effort, it prefers to help youth, rural people, orphans, or students as these are the groups which have been highlighted for assistance by social welfare groups and government agencies. No one thinks of helping 'housewives' and few are interested to render assistance to vulnerable women especially those in the minority groups, unless the recipients are members of political parties associated with the businesses. Resistance to help this section of women is also due to the lack of awareness and recognition of their deprived condition.

eH does not want to associate itself with companies doing MLM and direct-selling, companies selling beauty products or setting up slimming centres. It wants a more serious, genderless image to move away from the prejudice against housewives. Thus, seeking partnership with other businesses is the priority. Until now, eH's effort to portray its members as consumers to the general business sector has not been fruitful because businesses still perceive its members as 'poor' housewives without any buying power.

New concepts, old paradigm

ICT4D (ICT for development) was almost unheard of locally in the nineties. The public disbelief about ‘housewives’ using ICT was a huge barrier in the resource mobilization effort by eH. Even now, ICT4D for women is only associated with short-term computer training with little follow-up. However, “who wants to waste money to train housewives to use computers, they should be working in the kitchen!” Besides bridging social-economic development gaps with ICT by a purely grassroots group is unheard of locally.

Furthermore, ‘social enterprise’ is a new organizational concept here. Businesses and government are suspicious of enterprises doing social work. Local legislations do not give tax free status to non-profits unless they are registered as NGOs that are allowed to receive donations. Businesses approached for CSR initiatives are interested in tax deductions for their donations. They are used to giving one-time donations for publicity instead of collaborating with organizations to help the poor on a long-term basis. Those who are approached for partnership do not want to be associated with a social enterprise as they doubt the sustainability of such an entity when it doesn’t receive core funding from the government to do its social work like an NGO.

Corporate social responsibility that requires businesses to help with social causes without asking for anything back is also new in this country. It was only in 2007 that the government announced that all public-listed companies must report on CSR activities. Businesses still see CSR as a cheap way for publicity or a way to get government contracts if they give donations to organizations associated with ruling political parties.

No patronage No door

eH was founded as a community group with a person-to-person self-help principle. It does not want political patronage, which is essential for resource mobilization locally. Political patronage would render eH vulnerable to election results besides having eH associated with a race-based political party. eH believes in helping women of all religions and all races and it does not want to be seen as any political party or politician’s pet project.

Businesses however prefer to help groups with such patronage for business expediency and publicity. There is much to say about local corporate ethics when it comes to genuine CSR. The media, mostly owned by the ruling political parties, plays an important role in highlighting groups which receive CSR funds and donations from businesses. Potential advertising revenues for the media can come from such businesses when they receive positive publicity.

The ‘no-patronage-leads-to-neglect’ cycle was clearly shown to eH in 2005 when it won the Gender/ ICT Runner-up Award given by GKP and APC at the WSIS II in Tunis. eH sent news alerts to the media after receiving the international award but no one from the print or multi-media sector picked up the news. Such a reception was in stark contrast to the other two award recipients who received huge publicity in their home countries and their achievements were celebrated by many parties, thus facilitating their RM effort as well.

Informal status of homeworking sector

The homeworking sector is part of the informal economic sector in Malaysia. Its contribution is not recognized and it has not been surveyed or studied for development purposes. No

mapping has been done and therefore no one knows the exact number of homeworkers, the occupations they are in and their exact status. No legislation has been established to protect them in terms of safety and prevention of exploitation. No political interest has been expressed by any party to promote homeworkers' welfare as the sector is women-dominated, seen as silent participants and lacking capacity to vote. eH's resource mobilization efforts to raise funds locally for research and policy development, and assistance to the homeworking sector have been met with silence even after the findings of an IDRC-sponsored regional research on urban poor homeworkers were disseminated.

The Change Process

History of Change

As described in the section on sources of resources above, eH's resource mobilization effort reflects the following:

Evolution of eH from a grassroots voluntary informal group to a professionally managed social enterprise

When eH was a grassroots voluntary group with the main objective of helping other mothers to work from home, bartering and voluntary work was feasible as the RM effort was specific to each event. When the core volunteers had no time for the group, there was no resource mobilization and therefore no activities for a certain period. The group was not beholden to anyone to continue any activities and therefore there was no pressure to be seriously involved in RM in the long term. After its conversion into a social enterprise under the one-year DAG grant, the project staff had to engage seriously in resource mobilization to raise 30% of the complementary funds as required under the grant.

The resource sustainability issues came into play at this juncture. To cut operating expenses, eH had to be lean and efficient – it cut team strength from 25 full-timers gradually to six full-timers this year. It became professionally managed with regular publications and events. Seminars and trainings are conducted when strategic partnerships are to be formed with companies. The RM effort concentrates on scheduled activities and seeking sponsorship for ground events.

Maturity of eH's RM knowledge

Early grants forged dependency: Right after the DAG grant was over, eH received two award research grants and one major research grant between 2003 until mid- 2006. This allowed for financial stability as the team concentrated on implementing the disadvantaged women's project and research projects on advocacy for the urban poor. The platform to earn social profit from the poor was built during this period. More disadvantaged groups came forward, including Burmese refugees and transsexuals, asking for help to work @ home to survive. eH spent time and resources to gather information to build proposals to help them but eventually failed to obtain any grants due to the political and religious complexity of the targeted groups. Only a small amount of effort was spent to partner with businesses to raise sponsorships and revenues. The business side of eH was carried out half-heartedly while the grants were ongoing.

All in all, although eH is not an NGO, its resource generation effort through grant seeking activities with international funders in the early years of the social enterprise was more NGO-oriented. It did not realize that it should be building a sustainable business model to sustain itself while building a platform for social profit.

Angels were nowhere to be seen: By 2006-2007 when all the proposals that eH sent overseas for grants were turned down, it had a rude awakening to its resource sustainability efforts – “If we claim to be a social enterprise, where is our business plan? Where is the long-term RM plan for a sustainable social component which does not rely on grants? Grants should be bonus to eH instead of a necessity!”

Economic changes locally and the increasing awareness towards gender/ ICT

The government sector showed a lack of interest in ICT4D or gender in ICT until the last few years when the ICT4D movement in Asia Pacific became strong. The ED spoke as a voluntary speaker in conferences to anyone who would listen. A few officials and some women’s NGOs began to listen to eH’s advocacy. The networking widened, eH become more well known for its endeavours. There is increased awareness that women belong to the digital divide group and that grassroots networks like eH can contribute to the narrowing of digital gaps. This trend culminated in eH’s 2007 SOHO conference being partially sponsored by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community, for the first time. In addition, a few more businesses became more interested in listening to eH, though nothing concrete has taken shape until now.

Between 2004-2007, all international funders except IDRC rejected eH’s proposals for funding support. This was due to shifting donor priorities since Malaysia was now seen as a middle-income country due to its economic advancement. As a result, eH team is never invited to any programming training or conferences by international funders. The only invitations eH receives have been for its ED to give voluntary speeches in international conferences about eH and homeworking. Without training for the project staff on communication strategies and programming, the RM effort has thus been sporadic and not well planned.

The beginning of change

A man with two wives is like a knife with two sharp edges (Malay proverb)

Although funds have always been tight, eH’s resource mobilization process has produced membership growth, increased e-activities and subscriptions to its newsletters. The e-community has grown. The programming efforts reflect the results of the RM. When there is cash, more systematic activities on a bigger scale have been carried out instead of relying on a hodge-podge of unreliable volunteers and bartered services. eH has constantly balanced between helping the poor (which drains its financial resources) and sustaining itself through revenue generating activities from its membership. Should eH serve the general membership more than the SW members? Is the business side more important or the social side? These are questions that never stop being asked by eH. The answers lie in its never-ending pursuit of new options against no options!

Innovation is survival

eH trained a group of SW women to weave eco-baskets in 2005 but it was unable to market them properly to enable the women to earn income. The project incurred financial losses due to quality problems besides competition from Vietnamese and Chinese factory-made *rattan* baskets in the local market. The local market was not ready for higher-end, handmade eco-baskets from recycled paper. Unwilling to close down the project as advised by some businessmen, eH kept innovating the eco-basket weaving techniques and designs so that the baskets could be sold as handmade art instead of household items. The eco-project now aims to earn income to sustain itself without grants or sponsorship.

With the successful innovation on the eco-baskets, eH could see that if it were to survive, it needs to constantly innovate its services and help its members innovate theirs so that the entire e-community can sustain itself by helping each other.

Balance, balance – when, how?

IDRC encouraged and opened doors for eH since it was two years old as an organization. Its Pan Network introduced the Pan Asia Small Grant Round to eH, enabling the organization build the SW project for a few years. In late 2004, IDRC funded eH to implement a regional research on urban poor homeworkers, and it became an IDRC research partner. With this, training and speaking opportunities opened up for eH.

In 2005, IDRC invited eH to attend a RM workshop, warning its partners that international funders were moving away from Asia to Africa and newly emerged economies, and that the partners should embark on a comprehensive resource mobilization strategy. It was the first time that eH got a clear idea about who its friends were and what other innovative RM options were available.

Although eH was exposed to new knowledge, it could not carry out the options recommended in the RM workshop as it did not have the NGO status to source for donations, or form partnerships with companies to solicit donations. Neither did it know how to build a proper resource mobilization plan for a social enterprise. There was no mentor and no one sympathetic to eH's predicament. Furthermore, eH staff had to battle with the constant discouragement given by local businesses it approached, that women-centered social enterprises couldn't survive in Malaysia.

In August 2005, a CEO with a good heart gave two days of his time to explain and recommend new strategies to eH, based on its SWOT analysis. The eH team however could not accept his recommendations, which was as follows:

- ⊙ that eH should concentrate all its efforts to generate revenue with a proper business plan for investment;
- ⊙ that, revenue should come from eH being a consultant to governments or international agencies in teleworking and e-community building besides cultivating its assets – the e-members – for a revenue opportunity;
- ⊙ that the SW project, advocacy and research work should be wound up and eH should become a pure business entity until it generates enough profit to be in a stable financial situation to pour back a certain amount to the SW project. The model to follow would be the McDonald model whereby it pours a part of profit into the McDonald House for terminally ill children.

Unwilling to drop the SW project that it had been building since 2002, eH continued on the same path, with no overall clear RM strategy – only some tasks to generate enough revenue for sustainability. Soon, however, the ED became the driving force for resource mobilization as she had the ultimate financial responsibility. She knew that it was necessary to be serious about resource mobilization for the survival of eH but there was never enough time to do so. Staff strength was small; everyone was stretched to the limits. Three-quarters of the staff were working on the SW project and other non-revenue generating activities while the rest were involved in generating some income for the organization.

2005-07 also saw a series of technical problems on the two websites that eH had set up, i.e., www.justmarketing.info and www.ehomemakers.net. eH realized that it could not count on volunteers and bartering with IT businesses to fix its technical problems – cash was needed to

fix these problems. And doing this meant draining precious funds raised from earned income. The Executive Director cut her own salary to ensure that expenses were covered.

A Master's degree student from the United States who came to eH for a summer internship turned the stupor around in 2006. After helping out in several proposals to seek small grants to help some disadvantaged groups, she played the devil's advocate by asking this simple question, "How long can you last before all your funds are drained because you are trying to do too many social things at once? You can't save the world and no one is helping you to save the world. If you can't save yourself, how can you save others?"

By the time she left, the ED was critically awake to eH's resource mobilization situation. Subsequently, a fundraising document describing tasks to be done, who was responsible and expected outcomes every six months, was shared with the eH team. This was a renewed effort in resource mobilization and aimed at drawing team cooperation. However, since there was never enough time and many things to do, eventually, the actual RM exercise fell back on the ED. Moreover, there was again never enough time to write a detailed business plan and think systematically.

Caught in a chicken and egg situation, eH turned to the business sector to seek sponsorship for specific events, thinking that revenue would be generated faster through this option. Many turned the invitations down so eH sought help from an intermediary – D - with social standing in the business sector. D was set up by a political party to help small and medium businesses. eH appealed to D to open the door for eH in the business sector. Sympathetic to eH's social work, D's CEO introduced several local businesses to eH for corporate social responsibility activities and business partnerships. Unfortunately, none worked out due to differences in corporate governance values and that of eH, especially the organization's refusal to be involved in corrupt practices and backdoor schemes. Unknown to eH, all of them complained to D that eH's executive director was 'difficult to work with' as an excuse to D for not taking up the CSR effort.

Change is necessary

After you kick your toe at something hard, you finally know what pain is. (Hakka proverb)

After a futile year at fundraising attempts in 2006, eH figured out the key reason for its gaps in resource mobilization – eH had a business-branding problem. Businesses still saw eH and its staff as 'poor housewives' with no political backing and no money to sue them if they defaulted on payments for eH's services. They did not think that partnering with eH would help them secure contracts.

Finally, eH realized what its major resource mobilization weakness was – "we don't know the business of the business we are in!" eH realized that being in the ICT business it did not know enough about the ins and outs of local IT sector. It could now see three perspectives more clearly:

- i. Who are we and who do we want to be – do we want to earn money for money's sake or leave a legacy in life?
- ii. How should we raise funds according to our appeal and through whom?
- iii. Businesses want to do business, not CSR, but we don't know enough about their business operations to do 'business' with them.

By 2006, eH's financial resources were diminishing very fast. It was clear that regular activities had to be maintained by a core team that had to be paid salaries. Besides, the portal

built in 2002 was no longer serving the needs of the e-community who by now, was exposed to other web-based groups such as Linked, Facebook, Friendster, and web services such as You Tube and Google. The e-community activity level was low when there was a lack of funds to implement low-cost ground activities which they were used to. At the same time, several businesses locally set up similar e-communities to compete with eH. A few even asked for eH's database outright by claiming that eH, as a social enterprise, would not survive without the kind of investments they have.

Although there was more awareness on gender and ICT among the corporate sector as far as their social responsibility goes, few companies have come forward to sponsor eH's activities. Al Gore's documentary film, 'Inconvenient Truth' spurred an interest in environment related CSR. However, this does apply to the issues and sector that eH works on and therefore eH again misses the boat!

Lessons Learned

In its journey as a social enterprise, eH has learned several lessons:

- ⊙ Post this saying by Winston Churchill in the office – “Never never never never never never give up.”
- ⊙ Failure to generate adequate revenue does not mean that the entire organization has failed. It means that the organization hasn't looked hard enough to find the revenue streams. The hurdles are indications of what the organization should not do. Every failure is a solution – the organization learns not to do it the way it led to failure.
- ⊙ Seek a mentor who is a successful social entrepreneur. If not, seek a business and social work mentor, and reconcile the differences of opinion from the two by making responsible choices. (for start ups)
- ⊙ Seek the help of someone who could open the right door to the right party for revenue earning, if the organization is operating in an environment where a social enterprise is almost unheard of. Seek a reputable person from a reputable organization overseas, who can endorse the organization to mark the beginning of proper resource mobilization process.
- ⊙ The resource mobilization strategy should consist of a competitive revenue-earning stream that tie resources to work efficiently together, looking at the strength and finding ways to use it to the maximum potential.
- ⊙ The resource mobilization team must be willing to learn, listen and observe. It must think critically and think out of the box. Everything in the social component is also an asset. For e.g., poor women are assets for a revenue generation strategy because each of them has a pair of eyes, a pair of ears, a pair of legs, their own thoughts and opinions, and each one is a number.
- ⊙ If the staff strength is small during a stage when the funds are low and a critical change is eminent, the Executive Director, or the Chairperson of the Board must be the driver at this stage instead of leaving the key decisions to the staff or to the board as this is the stage where strong, timely leadership is needed.
- ⊙ To implement a cohesive resource mobilization strategy on the business side of the social enterprise, funds must be raised for a full-time marketing director, or a business manager to further plan and conduct the revenue earning activities properly. Never leave this position to part-time staff or people who come from the NGO sector. To make money, find someone who loves getting money, not someone who wants to save the world.

The Way Forward

What you don't get is sometimes a blessing. (Dalai Lama)

Strategies

With the lowest funding situation for two years and no new funds in sight, eH has been surviving on reserve funds and small revenues, with carefully planned activities. The fire is on, there is a pressing need to set in place a proper resource mobilization strategy, which would be appropriate for eH,'s mission AS SOON AS IT IS POSSIBLE.

Feeling besieged and lost, morale has become low, and staff turnover in the administrative team has become high, leading to more inefficiency. As of the present, it is clear that if eH were to survive, it needs to take some critical steps:

- ⊙ Activate the e-community with more home-based job opportunities and homepreneur activities, increase the membership and keep the members loyal to eH. If the e-membership reaches 50,000, the advertisement revenue and sponsored activities will come through naturally.
- ⊙ Recognize that it is in the business of ICT, not the business of 'helping the poor'. 'Helping the poor' should be the social component and not part of the business strategy. So eH must DO something about the bug filled, soon to be obsolete portal. eH needs to create multi-media based and interactive content with user-generated ability to keep its members interested in its portal services and to increase its membership to a sizable number. This would in turn help attract corporate interest and support.
- ⊙ Develop a viable business model and focus on a few activities with the highest potential to generate income to sustain all its own core expenses, and not depend on grants
- ⊙ Keep the disadvantaged women's project at a sustainable level, reduce the numbers from 300 and concentrate on helping only 200 women.
- ⊙ Innovate constantly and think out of the box to come out with a 'killer application' (a business term for a strong revenue-earning product) and at least one ground activity to attract the 1.2 million homemakers in Peninsular Malaysia towards eH.
- ⊙ Look at the power from within instead of seeking resources from outside – tap into the eH membership to source for more resources. See who has what skills and then categorize them into groups to create revenue streams.
- ⊙ The whole team especially the leadership must learn and understand more about business. eH must have clarity of its business plan, an effective branding strategy (CSR, business or non-profit) and it must be able to articulate to different parties at their level of understanding.
- ⊙ Tie up with strategic partners for a certain revenue strategy, run the revenue generation activities like businesses but with principles of fair play and ethics.
- ⊙ Aim to pay the team fees/ salaries comparable to those in the business sector to get the best talent and commitment. Retaining excellent staff especially those in the IT sector should be a top revenue earning aim.

IDRC's resource mobilization case study workshop (in late 2007) gave an imposed deadline for eH's executive director to reflect, analyze and document its RM history. Ideas were mooted to several 'Friends of eH' whenever anyone had the time to listen. It can be said that now finally, the resource mobilization path for eH is much clearer than before. In the near

future, eH strategy for resource mobilization would be divided into two parts to meet its mission:

1. Business strategy:

- a) an IT grant/ investment to rebuild and revamp the website so that the e-community can embark on proper telework and homepreneurship development. Develop a proper business plan for www.ehomemakers.net so that the newly built e-engines can earn revenue to sustain the web-team;
- b) development of a killer application to beat the profit-seeking competitors and earn income to sustain the core team.

2. Social strategy

- a) seek grants to set up and run the cyber-telecentre properly and get contracts to ensure sustainability, make www.justmarketing.info sustainable;
- b) create a break-even scenario in the eco-basket project;
- c) seek a major research grant to continue the advocacy on the rights of urban poor homeworkers;
- d) organize a focal-point led volunteer system whereby a few retired people and expatriat wives could be the leaders of clusters, which have a specific aim to help a specific group of disadvantaged women.

The formula for resource mobilization by eH is: efficient use of human resources (staff+ volunteers) + more ICT oriented to reduce transport/ telecommunication costs +focus on a few activities + more ROI (return of investment) oriented.

Going where no one has gone before

eH has innovated the idea of an ICT application, which it knows, will generate income from users and at the same time, address women's needs. No one from business or government has done this before. The innovation will be groundbreaking. eH will have to seek the funds to make it materialize.

The road to RM is still ahead as eH continues to learn about business development. There will always be several factors, which will interplay each other to determine the success of resource mobilization outcomes in eH's unique situation. Coping with changes will require eH to connect with more information resources and practice networking better. Seeking mentors will be essential to build a proper RM plan and execute it in the next phase of eH's history. Most of all eH must be better at negotiations and creating win-win solutions.

The journey continues. And, a road must be carved out to go around each mountain that eH encounters.