



Artisans in southern India have been using traditional methods to make and sell textiles for generations. But while many of their skills may not have changed over the years, this cottage industry is today reaping the benefits of modern business technologies and practices – thanks to the HP Entrepreneurship Learning Program (HELP)

Launched by HP in 2007, the program is designed to help the smallest of the small businesses grow their enterprises and create jobs by providing them with access to technology, training and business skills.

At a time when an estimated 25 – 30 per cent of the world's labour force is unemployed or underemployed, micro-enterprises are the world's fastest-growing business sector and seen as an important source of job creation and economic stimulation for local communities.

HP has invested more than \$1.5 million in the program in 2009, enabling 13,000 micro entrepreneurs to access training through local non-profit Micro-Enterprise Development Centres (MEDCs). The program funds and equips these centres, as well as providing a curriculum designed in partnership with the Micro-Enterprise Acceleration Institute (MEA-I). The program also provides funding to teach trainers and networking for MEDCs at HP-sponsored events.

Artists embrace new technologies

The Federation of South India Producers Association (SIPA) is one of 17 non-profit organisations to share in this year's funding. The organisation received US\$80,000 to establish a MEDC that will provide IT training for 200 of its members to learn how to solve everyday business challenges, expand and create jobs.

A network of non-government, voluntary and community-based agencies, SIPA works with more than 5000 artisan families to generate sustainable income from their crafts through product development, marketing and consortium exports.



SIPA spokeswoman Ms Anuram said the HELP program has benefited many of their member agencies by raising awareness of the potential for computer use and the benefits it can have on business development.

"Following the training and during our field visits, we could feel the rapid change within these producer groups and their networks," Ms Anuram said.

"We could see the impact the HELP program was having. They were able to feel the relevance and usefulness of the training and see how it could support their day-to-day activities."

Ms Anuram said the training has encouraged participants to explore the broader use of technology for enterprise development and effective management, as well as informing them about a range of other opportunities such as using JPEG attachments to provide imagery of samples.

Building greater efficiencies through technology

One of the first organisations to benefit from training at SIPA's MEDC was the Timely Aiding Society in Pondicherry – a service organisation that works with 15 women to produce cotton bags that are exported through SIPA.

Society Secretary Mr Rajendran attended Smart Technology for a Smarter Business training (STSB) in February 2009 and almost immediately reported improvements with production management and increases in overall team efficiency.

While the society has one desktop computer, Mr Rajendran said he was not using the programs or systems effectively and the training has opened his eyes to the potential of technology.

"I've started putting our production plan onto an Excel spreadsheet and linking various production and marketing activities. This includes production planning, attendance register, salary statements, costing and pricing, our delivery schedule for orders, sales and payments, and even a business plan for each production cycle", Mr Rajendran said.

"With this I am able to execute two orders with better planning, ensuring I can honour timely delivery through regular review and control.

"This training was very useful and I've seen improvements in production management and overall team efficiency," he said.

Ms Anuram said Mr Rajendran's confidence has grown since completing the training and he is keen to utilise his new skills to further build production and increase marketing.

"SIPA is confident that with more training and efficient use of the technology, Mr Rajendran could increase his productivity and the income level of the artisans."



Practical assistance builds capacity

Another group to benefit from SIPA's involvement in HELP this year is PASAM, an organisation that works to improve the life skills and capacity of the rural poor in 76 villages in the Erode district in Tamilnadu.

Among its activities, PASAM coordinates the marketing of woven foot mats that are made from cotton waste by self-help groups.

PASAM secretary Ms Gowri said while she had only used computers for typing before attending STSB training in February 2009, the week-long program highlighted opportunities to use Excel for accounts, to record attendance and prepare salary sheets.

The organisation also runs a residential school for children who have dropped out, especially girls from tribal areas, and computers are now being used to record the monthly budget, expenses and funding allocations for more effective monitoring and reporting.

"The training given to me by SIPA was quite practical and so useful. Now I am able to store and see our position and feel comfortable. I believe there is a lot more that we can do to use technology to build capacity, coordinate production and increase our marketing," Ms Gowri said.

As the next stage of its training program, SIPA has suggested PASAM raise awareness among self-help group leaders, women and children on the use and benefits of computers and technology.

Focus groups of women and children will receive orientation on basic computer functions before going on to receive practical instruction on Excel and Word.

A sustainable and meaningful approach

According to Pete Ekstedt, Global Citizenship Manager, HP Asia-Pacific & Japan, more than 8500 micro-enterprises in the Asia Pacific region have been through the program as of May 2009, with more than half of them reporting significant improvements to their business. Hundreds of new jobs have also been created.

"Like all our social investment programs, the objective of HELP is to make a genuine, significant and sustained contribution to the community and we aim to not only assist micro-entrepreneurs and their families, but also the wider economies and communities to which they belong," Pete said.

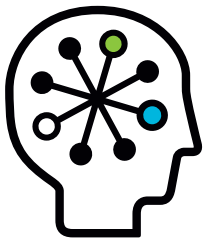
"It is our hope that these enhanced resources will arm micro-enterprises with the expertise to deal with greater business challenges, enabling them to grow their businesses and create new jobs.

"We want to go far beyond simply giving away money and equipment. We want to work collaboratively with our partners and grant recipients to build lasting relationships that deliver increasing benefits to the community. We want to help the micro-entrepreneurs become self-sustainable so they will then be able to stimulate their local economy in the long-term."

SIPA's Ms Anuram said her organisation has already seen many of HP's objectives realised in her community, and many people can now look forward to a more secure economic future.

"As more artisans come through the program we are seeing that youngsters are interested in entrepreneurship rather than working for others. Our aim is to train and facilitate the micro-entrepreneurs and youth to become IT enabled, ethical entrepreneurs with systems and information in hand for effective communication and building viable enterprises," Ms Anuram said.

"The future is challenging and bright."



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