



Women working in the "Gazelle Enterprise," a felt workshop in Mongolia. UNV photograph.

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY THROUGH TRADITIONAL TEXTILE PRODUCTION

After graduating from high school in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, Saysomone Bunsud had only very few opportunities open to her. For two years, she stayed at home, helping her parents work the family rice fields.

Now 21, Saysomone has discovered a new future as a textile designer and seamstress, through her apprenticeship with the Lao Youth Union's Textile Handicraft Workshop.

The bright, airy workshop in Luang Prabang is located at the key intersection of Lao's ancient capital and former seat of the royal family. Tourists visiting the UNESCO-designated World Heritage site located in the central highlands of Lao wander in — frequently asking for directions and information — and end up buying the carefully crafted items on sale. Wooden shelves display clothing, bags, and western-style household goods like placemats, napkins or tea cozies.

Saysomone sits at one of eight sewing machines in the center of the room, stitching a tricky section of a handbag. She is intent on her work, and looks up only to check her progress with her trainer, United Nations Volunteer Eriko Kawaguchi. Pressing the sewing machine's foot pedal with her bare feet, Saysomone carefully works on a piece of indigo-dyed fabric. All of the products she sews are made of naturally-dyed Lao cotton.

To produce the soft but resilient fabric, cotton threads are made by removing seeds from the cotton fibres, which are then carded and spun. The threads are then dyed, dried, spun onto spools, and finally woven on handmade wooden looms.

Eriko Kawaguchi is adamant that all the materials in the workshop must be dyed naturally. "Smell this," she says, passing over a bolt of indigo-dyed cotton. "Cotton dyed with natural indigo has a rich characteristic scent and can easily be identified." When one of the dyers was ill and had a friend do the dyeing instead, the scent was missing — and the yarn was sent back.

The textile project began in September 2001, with the selection of two villages where natural dyeing methods are still practiced, and weaving skills are strong.

Dyers in Hat Kho and Nanyang Thai received supplemental training on natural dyeing techniques from the Lao Women's Union, but what was missing was information about how to use these skills to access markets and increase income. This is where Kawaguchi's skills came into play. An award-winning textile designer, UN Volunteer Kawaguchi recognized that what was needed was organization and training. She established two producer groups of weavers in each village, each made up of five young weavers and one senior dyer. Older, skilled craftswomen who received training were encouraged to then train younger community members.

Now, once material is produced by the weavers, it is ready for the apprentice designers to transform into marketable goods. Saysomone is one of four young women who have industriously studied, designed, and sewed their way through six-month apprenticeships. In addition to sewing skills, she now has the ability to create new and inventive designs, and the knowledge of what will appeal to tourists.

Ecotourism advisor to the Luang Prabang Provincial Tourism Department and UN Volunteer Ronny Dobbeltstein says, "Most tourists are eager to buy things when they know where the products come from." Environmentally-friendly souvenirs are popular with tourists, and the workshop works so that money goes directly to the villagers without middlemen taking a cut of the profits.

In Saysomone's case, not only has she been able to successfully produce and sell innovative goods, but she has also been able to take advantage of a revolving fund structure set up by the project. Some of the apprentices accepted work to take home and complete, but Saysomone did not have a sewing machine. However, because she was so eager and hard working, she was given a loan from the project funds. Her sewing machine cost over \$40 US. While monthly loan re-payments were set at \$15 US per month, Saysomone was able to produce and sell enough goods to pay back the loan at US\$20 per month — quite a feat when in the past she had no personal income.

Saysomone is now part of a network of craftswomen that will be able to profit from keeping traditional expertise alive — with the knowledge of what international consumers want, and the ability to adapt her creative skills. As she pauses and looks out the window of the textile workshop, Saysomone sees a bright future ahead.

WOOL FOR WOMEN

UN VOLUNTEERS SUPPORT BIODIVERSITY IN MONGOLIA

Some 17,000 nomadic herders roam the arid steppes of Mongolia's eastern Dornod province. They eke out a living by selling meat and goat's cashmere, but they cannot turn a profit on sheep's wool. Most herders, living hundreds of kilometres from large markets, discard their wool on the steppes — lean earnings do not even cover transportation costs.

Nine national United Nations Volunteers (UNVs) work nearby. They link biodiversity and livelihoods in a range of community-based projects under an initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environmental Facility. They have also come up with a scheme to cash in on the herders' wool, and provide income to unemployed people living in the province's "soums", or settlements. Matad soum, located in one of the buffer zones of the nine state-protected areas in the eastern steppes, is one of the poorest soums in Dornod province: 70 per cent of its 2,300 inhabitants live below the poverty line. To make ends meet, many people hunt for wild gazelles and marmots.



Seamstresses at the Lao Youth Union's Textile Handicraft Workshop hold up finished products. UNV photograph.

The "Gazelle Enterprise"

Sharavyn Tsendsuren, a 40-year-old widow, lives in Matad soum. She lost her job as a state-sponsored veterinarian after the collapse of the centrally-planned economy in 1990. She moved from job to job, starting as a kindergarten teacher and ending up as a school janitor. Unemployed for a year, she struggled to care for her four children, two of whom are disabled.

But her life changed for the better last year when national UN Volunteer Sharavyn Ulzyduuren, a former math teacher, invited her and nine other unemployed women to help set up a small felt workshop. Ms. Ulzyduuren, together with UN Volunteer Seveengyin Batsaikhan from Chuluunkhoroot soum, secured the first loan from the project's Community Conservation Fund (CCF). The idea was to use the wool of domestic livestock to produce goods that people need and sell them at affordable prices. Buying wool in the soum centre meant bringing the market closer to the herders. Ms. Ulzyduuren says the workshop aims to provide income to herders through the sale of their wool while stopping them from polluting the environment. It also provides work for the jobless — an approach to inspire local people to become environment-conscious and productive members of their communities.

The women called their workshop the "Gazelle Enterprise", although the local people mostly refer to it as the "Wool's 10". They were given a felt processing machine valued at US \$600, and with the help of their UN Volunteer, secured and repaired a room. After a month of training from felt specialists from the capital Ulaanbaatar, they began making colourful hats, boots, slippers and bags. Most of the demand on the local market is for camel and horse saddles as well as warm felt boots and socks for wearing inside the large traditional Mongolian boots — gutal. "People cannot afford to buy fancy stuff, and the quality of our local wool is not sufficient for making more sophisticated things," says Otgontuya Olzyihutag, one of the felt makers.

Every item they produce is sold with a "Gazelle Enterprise" logo picturing gazelles and carrying a call for protecting the unique biodiversity of the eastern steppes, specifically the wild gazelles, which are illegally hunted for profit and for subsistence. "We are very happy now that we have a job and we see our future to be bright," says Ms. Tsendsuren. "It is the mercy of the gazelles that have given us this job and we pray to them," she says.

UN VOLUNTEERS: INVOLVING PEOPLE IN DEVELOPMENT

Administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme promotes volunteerism as a development concept. It does so by building on a culture of volunteerism and by mobilizing skilled, dedicated people — on-site and on-line — to devote their time and knowledge in the pursuit of development. The year 2001 was UNV's 30th anniversary — and its fifth straight year of growth. Over 5,000 UN Volunteers representing 160 nationalities carried out 5,400 assignments in 140 countries.

UN Volunteers in the field partner with governments and non-governmental organizations, as well as with United Nations organizations, funds and programmes in a range of development activities. They work with communities and local institutions to strengthen their capacity in mapping out their own development.

UN Volunteers actively support North-South cooperation. More than two-thirds of UNVs are from the developing world, with half of them contributing to the development of their home countries as national volunteers, the other half working abroad as international UNVs.

Working to build trust, UN Volunteers support peacekeeping, peace-building, electoral processes and humanitarian relief.

They contribute to bridging the digital divide by helping information-poor communities to benefit from information technologies — and thus improve access to education, facilitate information and knowledge-sharing, as well as create income-generating opportunities.

UN Volunteers combat the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic with a range of activities, from building government capacity to counseling sex workers. The involvement of UN Volunteers who are themselves HIV-positive has greatly helped to build networks among people living with HIV/AIDS and to strengthen self-help groups in dealing with the social and economic impact of the epidemic at the community level.

As focal point for the International Year of Volunteers 2001, UNV continued to actively support initiatives at local, national and global levels. Through the Year, important steps were made in recognizing the value of volunteerism, including its economic contributions to society and its role in building social cohesion. On 5 December 2001, 126 Member States co-sponsored the General Assembly resolution 56/38 in support of volunteering.

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