



CASE STUDY

Green Growth The Picha Project

Background Information

In 2013, Kim Lim, Suzanne Ling, and Lee Swee Lin, fellow students at University College Sedaya International (UCSI) in Malaysia, were working on a project which helped university students find volunteer opportunities helping refugees and special-needs schools. Children from a local refugee community came to them for tutoring help in English, math, and science, but there was a high dropout rate for those students. They therefore decided to visit families whose children had dropped out to see where the problem lied. They so learned that many families in the community were facing extreme financial challenges, and that school was not free for their children. Because of this, some families had to pull their children out of school as a matter of survival.

During one home visit, Kim realized that many of the refugees knew how to cook and some of them had done so professionally. Using those skills could provide a way for them to earn an income with which to take care of their families and allow their kids to stay in school.

In January 2016, the idea became a reality as they launched the Picha Project, a social enterprise that seeks to empower marginalized members of their community by providing them with dignified work. The business started out working with a single family that came from a community of Chin people in Myanmar. That family had a child who was learning music but was in danger of dropping out.

Approach, Delivery, & Challenges

One of the biggest challenges the team faced early on was their lack of business knowledge. Having launched the Picha Project without prior business experience, they had no knowledge on what was needed to develop a sustainable organization. They didn't have a proper business plan, nor did they have any experience with operations or administration. Since the project had already started, they had to find a way to figure out the basics quickly.

To acquire business skills, they looked for advice from business people from their community, but they also looked for other learning opportunities to accelerate their progress. They attended talks about running businesses, where they learned about a social entrepreneurship accelerator program that was being hosted by the Malaysia Global Innovation and Creativity Center (MaGIC). They applied to the program and were selected. This gave them fifteen weeks of classes and RM 30,000 in seed funding.



As the team went through the MaGIC program, they continued to expand their business, as they improved their business model. During that time, they also started gathering feedback from their customers to help them tailor the food to customer preferences. From there, the Picha Project continued to grow, taking it from the side project they had started with into something that became a full-time effort. The team was positively impacting the people they had set out to help by giving them the opportunity to earn an income, and they could see the chance for continued growth.

With growing demand, the team had to identify additional families to take part in the project. At the start, that had been done through Hands of Hope's students. Later, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) began to make recommendations, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) would also help by giving them lists of people that might be interested in the project. Over time, they developed a set of criteria to evaluate potential cooks:

1. *Employment status*: Families living below the poverty line were given priority.
2. *Family culture*: Willingness to deliver on Picha's hygiene standards and adequate kitchen facilities.
3. *Attitude*: They need to be open to feedback and willing to learn and work together in a close-knit team setting.

Picha takes orders via email, phone, Facebook, or WhatsApp. The orders are given to families two days prior to their preparation, which gives the families time to purchase ingredients and do any prep work prior to preparing the meal. Meal preparation and deliveries are scheduled to ensure the food is hot and still fresh when it's received.

Orders are prepaid, with a minimum of five meals per order for the standard delivery service. Cost and logistical challenges prevent the team from taking smaller orders. The Picha Project's internal operations are manual, so their ability to collect meaningful data on their sales and operations is limited.



*The Picha Project's chain of operations.*¹

Benefits & Lessons Learned

The Picha Project is fulfilling its goal of supporting refugee families and keeping their kids in school. They now have ten families working with them and are gearing up to scale the project significantly.

The project started with a simple meal box delivery service that now takes orders for ten to fifteen hundred meals. That evolved to include a full-service catering business that feeds up to five hundred people at a sitting. Picha has also started to produce a small number of non-perishable products, and they now offer open houses in which guests can order a shared meal with one of the workers.

The Picha team started another program with the goal of raising awareness for the refugee community. The events bring together up to one hundred guests to share meals prepared by Picha families, while they share stories of hardships they endured after becoming displaced from their homelands.

¹ "The Picha Project - Part D," *ASEAN Social Innovation Review*, March 2018, <http://asireview.org>.



The Picha Project remains relationship-driven, but the role of leadership has become more formalized over time, as with multiple catering events occurring at the same time, and dozens of delivery meals to fulfill, the Picha Project's leaders tend to have their hands full. Its leaders now act as the agent to (1) supervise the families, (2) ensure the quality of their products, (3) package the products, (4) market the products, (5) deliver to customers, and (6) provide profits to the families.

Opportunities & Next Steps

The Picha team is working to expand their management capabilities as they prepare to scale their social enterprise.

Given the circumstances and past hardships of the families with whom the Picha team works, resilience has been an important concern for its leadership team. They're building it through the employment they provide, and the stability that offers helps stabilize the broader community.

In January 2018, the Picha team competed in Malaysia's country round of a social enterprise competition. They won that competition, so their leadership team then had the chance to participate in an intensive social entrepreneurship course at the Skoll Center at Oxford University. In May 2018, they will go to Amsterdam, where the founders will have the chance to pitch for a portion of \$1,000,000 in funding.

As they prepared for that competition, the organization's leaders committed to use any funding they won to (1) research and develop additional non-perishable products, (2) do community outreach through Picha kiosks, (3) create an effective operating system, and (4) become the face of a sustainable solution for the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

The Picha Project has come a long way in a short time, and its leadership team has evolved to meet the challenges they have encountered. What seems certain is their commitment to continuing to support the community that's become a family.

References

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