

Montagnard refugee community development initiative Cambodia



"Maybe I can make a business out of this someday"

- **K'Sor H'Wang**
a 13 year old refugee

LOCATION

UNHCR Montagnard sites,
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

DURATION

10 months
(from October 2008, ongoing)

IMPLEMENTING PARTNER

International Friendship
Development Organization
of Cambodia (IFDO)

BUDGET

US \$600.00

OVERVIEW

Since 2001, approximately 3,000 Montagnards (an ethnic minority from the Central Highlands) have crossed the border to seek asylum in Cambodia. They are housed at UNHCR's protected sites in Phnom Penh where they receive full care and maintenance. However, travel and employment outside the sites is restricted.

AIM OF PROJECT

The project was intended to increase the range of activities at the UNHCR Montagnard sites, whilst providing refugees with viable skills. The initiative drew on existing resources from within the community, in this case women who were able to weave and knit. Crocheting, as a feature activity, was easy to teach and learn, and the materials (cotton and woolen yarn) were inexpensive to procure.

PROJECT OUTPUTS / RESULTS

- Approximately 60 women were divided into groups of ten, with a leader to teach and guide them.
- The women started creating scarves and hats, progressing to baby booties.
- Having mastered the basic skills, the women were able to tailor items into various sizes/fits, choose colours and incorporate different patterns and designs.

IMPACTS

The participants found the activity interesting and challenging. Although the products were not intended for sale, many of them took pride in their progress and quality of work. The initiative also fostered a sense of camaraderie amongst the women, as they were able to chat openly and share the burden of watching each other's children.

The majority of women had not finished school and depended largely on their husbands for financial support. Amongst those waiting awaiting resettlement, many now feel that they can contribute financially rather than become burdens when joining their families abroad. In the meantime, due to improvements in the Central Highlands, many Montagnards have returned home. Having learnt a few new skills, these women can also look towards diversifying their income generating activities at home.

Due to the success of the crocheting project, women are now learning to weave. Some of the older women are passing the weaving heritage on to the younger generation, which in turn keeps the community's culture and values alive.

LESSONS LEARNED

Despite the modest scale of the project, the benefits were far reaching. Giving the women an opportunity to be engaged in skill building activities lifted the general mood and enhanced the sense of community at the sites. The project encouraged more positive relations amongst the women and the community as a whole, reducing their dependency on UNHCR/the implementing partner to resolve internal issues. The project also allowed the office to explore empowerment and development opportunities within a refugee population who were entirely dependent on UNHCR for care and maintenance.