**David Schwartz**

Empower Reflection

During my month in India, I met with around 12 non-governmental, sustainable development, or socially entrepreneurial organizations. The ranged from the Toehold Artisan Collaborative, an enterprise that produces footwear with eco-friendly materials in a small village called Athani in Karnataka to SELCO, an energy entrepreneurial organization that sells solar panels and lights to low income individuals in villages and has a mission to jumpstart economies and improve life with lights.

I also found a seemingly infinite amount of reasons why BUILD’s business development module was… well, wrong. Or at least not ready.

Through talking to group after group and then attending several conferences since I’ve been back in Boston regarding social entrepreneurship and income generation, I’ve found that designing a business model is an incredible undertaking. BUILD found this so when we were in India even, feeling that we were being unfair in trying to create a business model as a part-time organization (in that we are students who go to school and it’s not our job to obsess over a business model twenty-four hours a day). Instead, we reached out to other options of income generation.

We met with a few organizations like DesiCrew, groups that went to villages in need of income generation and provided outsourcing opportunities. BUILD became learnéd on the results: better education, better living, even social tension as a product of the women (the non-farmers) making more money than the men in these patriarchal societies. But it seemed like every time we found another group, our village still had problems that made it unprofitable for these organizations: Thottiapatti lacks knowledge of English, lacks knowledge of computers, lacks the required amount of villagers. Plus, before our projects came to fruition by the end of the trip, Thottiapatti lacked reliable access to electricity, lacked computers, lacked the Internet.

But now, being back on the ground and writing this for Empower, I’m able to reflect. In fact, the business group for BUILD: India met recently and we decided to go back, to start over. Not just go back to square one. Go back to square negative one. Go back to a primordial period of discussion to figure out *what* Thottiapatti needs. True, Thottiapatti has more assets now than it did before, but even so: social entrepreneurship can take many forms, and as students we need to find the linkages to the ideas that will give Thottiapatti what it needs right now.

The endless cycles of learning, making, and undoing have taught me much about the topic. Now, when our business meeting assembles we don’t naively say “Thottiapatti needs an income generation module!” and try to figure out how to bring in money to the area. Instead, we disassemble the equation. We question the jump to consumerism—to capitalize on a traditional trade skill to sell bags to the masses, to acquire celebrity love and have Drew Barrymore rock your village’s purse because “it’s for a cause.” We question how low self-confidence in the area affects individuals’ ability to engage in consumer ventures. We question what we can do a student group to make Thottiapatti “better” for Thottiapattians—can we kill two birds with one stone? Ten?

We’re not really at square negative one, though it might feel like it. We’re where we’re supposed to be, more knowledgeable than before, living and breathing a concept and figuring out the best form it needs to take. We are separating ourselves from the Market and making our own to help the Thottipattians help themselves.

Besides, Payir, the NGO we’ve partnered with, has a bag initiative where it is teaching women how to sew so they can generate their own source of income. This is something an organization like Payir can do, as it’s involved and on the ground every day of the year. But we as students must work different, and we as students must use that to our advantage.