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OPPORTUNITY
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AGENCY: The capacity of individuals to make their own free choice.

Level 11, 227 Elizabeth Street Sydney NSW 2000
PO BOX A524 Sydney South NSW 1235

T 1800 812 164 **E** opinfo@opportunity.org.au

W www.opportunity.org.au **ABN** 83 003 805 043

f facebook.com/opportunityAUS/

in linkedin.com/company/opportunityaus

@ instagram.com/opportunityaus/

t twitter.com/OpportunityAUS

> Cover: Sangeeta spent her childhood fighting for her education. Today, she is a Social Performance Management (SPM) officer at ESAF, one of Opportunity's microfinance partners in India. SPM measures changes in clients' welfare to understand how their lives are improving. © Kim Landy

> Above: Panchafula started a pappadum business in her home kitchen. With the help of a small loan, she invested in bulk ingredients and appliances to grow her business. Panchafula uses the income to pay for her family's medical expenses. © Kim Landy

Thank you



For Opportunity to be most effective, we ensure our work is carried out by locally owned and operated implementation partners. Our partners are organisations that understand local customs, compliance requirements and all the cultural subtleties that make them suitably qualified to work with those living in poverty. They also have the same mission as us – a passion to end poverty.

Right now, our partners are operating in countries where COVID-19 infection rates are escalating. The sheer impact on the health infrastructure and the long-term economic effects in those countries cannot be fathomed.

And yet what our implementation partners have done over the past few months—as the world has dealt with the impact of COVID-19—to support clients in the aftermath of lockdown, that almost overnight evaporated daily economic activity, simply blows me away.

Whilst our Indonesian microfinance partners could and did voluntarily offer loan repayment moratoriums to their clients, our Indian microfinance partners had no choice and were required to do so under government direction. With lockdown conditions creating extremely limited cash inflows, our partners were treading a cashflow nightmare, trying to pay their employees while maintaining their own payments back to their lenders. Some continue to have significant cashflow stress.

Yet despite this, our partners put their clients' needs first. They have shown true love; a Philippians 2 type of love by putting the needs of others before the needs of the organisation.

Our Health and Safety partners have been simply overwhelmed by the increased demand on their services. Domestic violence rates have escalated, and the Basic Care Provider team has been trained in identifying possible cases of COVID-19 infection and arranging referrals – sometimes at personal risk. Getting the message out on how to prevent the spread of the disease has been the work of all of our partners, regardless of what their business was.

Our microfinance network—which pre-COVID managed the collection and checking on some 6.7 million small loans—has, once lockdown conditions lifted, allowed for the distribution of life-saving equipment. This included supplying hundreds of thousands of items of personal protection gear (masks, gloves, etc), sanitation items, emergency food or meal supplies, spreading COVID-19 prevention messages to communities (in multiple ways and means), and providing direct support to clients to access government stimulus funds, tele-health solutions, or counselling support. It was primarily funded out of their own money but was additionally supported through our COVID-19 appeal.

This passion to help, to leave no stone unturned, and to find a way forward despite seemingly insurmountable challenges, is exactly what makes me passionate about the work we do, and the partners we chose to work with.

WHY WE EXIST

OUR VISION

A world in which all people have the opportunity to achieve a life free from poverty, with dignity and purpose.

OUR MISSION

By providing financial solutions and training, we empower people living in poverty to transform their lives, their children's futures and their communities.

OUR MOTIVATION

We respond to Jesus Christ's call to love and serve the poor. We seek to emulate the Good Samaritan, whose compassion crossed ethnic groups and religions.

OUR VALUES

- Commitment
- Humility
- Respect
- Integrity
- Stewardship
- Transformation

But working with the partners over these past few months has been tough. The levels of stress they continue to face, especially not knowing when this may all end, or when the latest change to lockdown conditions will be announced, cannot be denied. Yet their focus on supporting those in poverty has been absolutely inspiring. And the work each and every one of the Opportunity staff continues to do to support those partners has been equally impressive.

But none of this is possible without your amazing support and engagement. You encourage us to push for a brighter future for those living in poverty. Thank you for allowing us to, not only address the economic condition of our clients, but also address their most basic needs at a time when it has become far too apparent that they do not enjoy the same economic and social safety nets as we do. ●

Meredith Scott

CEO, Opportunity International Australia



IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

A recent study conducted by the University of Chicago's Center for RISC in partnership with Opportunity, shows the importance of Opportunity's EduFinance Program to improve educational outcomes for children.

"This is the first evidence we have that the EduFinance program is not only increasing access to education but is also improving the quality of education as well," said Andrew McCusker, Head of EduFinance.

For people living in poverty, a quality education can be difficult for many families to access. Government schools are often low-cost or free, but many suffer from overcrowding, underfunding, chronic teacher absenteeism, strikes or bureaucracy issues that challenge the students' ability to learn even basic literacy or numeracy skills. In some communities there simply are no government schools for children to attend.

One fast-growing solution is low-cost, affordable private schools. But while these ensure local children have access to education, they often lack infrastructure, capacity and teacher resources.

Through School Improvement Loans, Opportunity International's global EduFinance program helps schools invest in infrastructure, add new classrooms or gender-separated washrooms, or purchase teaching and learning resources and essential equipment to facilitate better learning opportunities for children.

To better understand impact and to seek ways to improve the program, EduFinance partnered with University of Chicago's Center for RISC (Radical Innovation for Social Change) and used Uganda's Primary Leaving Examination scores to measure the effectiveness of School Improvement Loans.

The purpose of the study was to provide EduFinance with insights into two important research questions:

1. **How effective have school investments been in increasing learning outcomes for pupils?**
2. **What are the most effective investments that a low fee school proprietor can make to increase learning outcomes for pupils?**

The study used the Primary Leaving Examination scores for 9,580 schools in Uganda from 2010 to 2016 and 2019, measuring the loan amounts, the type of investment made and years available for 77 schools that worked with Opportunity EduFinance. The study then compared the changes in test scores of Opportunity EduFinance schools that made school investments to those schools that didn't.

KEY FINDINGS

- Schools that invested in a School Improvement Loan performed better on average than other schools
- Student scores made a statistically significant shift upwards towards Division 1 (highest) and Division 2 (second highest) ratings
- Schools overwhelmingly preferred investing in infrastructure and teacher training.

"THIS SCHOOL WAS MY DREAM."

When Sapna was a child she enjoyed a privilege too many girls in India miss out on—an education. Sapna grew up surrounded by a supportive family committed to educating all their children.

As a child, Sapna was inspired to spread the power of education to others.

Each afternoon, Sapna would race home from school to show Pinky—a friend whose family couldn't afford to send her to school—everything she had learnt that day.



➤ Sapna is the principal of a low-cost, affordable school in Nagpur, India.

Today, Sapna is the principal of a low-cost, affordable private school for more than 200 children in India. With a loan through Opportunity's partner ESAF, Sapna invested in better infrastructure at the school, including four new toilets. Girls often drop out of school because of embarrassment and the lack of privacy. With access to toilets, children can continue their education safely and with dignity.

"Starting this school was my dream," Sapna said.

Opportunity's EduFinance program has now benefitted approximately 1.3 million children in India.



➤ Students at a school in Nagpur, India. With the assistance of School Improvement Loans, schools can buy textbooks, build toilet blocks and invest in teacher salaries. © Kim Landy



OPPORTUNITY'S MICROFINANCE PARTNERS RESPOND TO COVID-19

Opportunity's microfinance partners have introduced new initiatives in response to coronavirus and to support families living in poverty during this time.

In India, tough lockdown measures introduced in March to limit the spread of the virus caused a significant loss in families' income due to the closure of businesses. In response, loan repayment terms were extended for clients who were struggling to meet their repayments and in some cases emergency loans were introduced to help clients restart their businesses. Partners also distributed masks, sanitiser and soap to clients who were in need during the lockdown.

For example, our partner, Satya Microfinance had, up until 30 June, distributed:

- Food and health kits to 2,400 families
- Protective gear and protective kits, including 20,000 masks and gloves, to villagers

- Health kits with masks, hand wash, soap and sanitiser, to the families of their 1,500 employees
- Meals for migrants' program, feeding 400,000 displaced migrant labourers and their families as they travelled back to their homelands
- Information through a 24/7 toll free medical help line with both information and health consultations. Seventy thousand people accessed this service in the three months it operated to 30 June

And whilst this is just one partners' efforts, it is indicative of both the scale and types of assistance each of our partners have materialised to their clients and the communities they serve.

With many districts still in or reimplementing red level lockdown as local infection rates spike, operations continue to be far from 'normal'. As such it is difficult to get an accurate picture across our Indian portfolio.

At the time of publication, India was the third country in the world to record more than 2 million cases of coronavirus.

In Indonesia, all of Opportunity's microfinance partners are providing moratoriums on loan repayments for clients, ranging from a few weeks to three months. Where appropriate, partners have implemented fortnightly rather than weekly repayments for clients who wish to continue their repayments. All partners are working with clients and discussing with them the best way to move forward if their business is struggling or if they are unable to make their repayments. They have also distributed masks, sanitiser and soap to staff and clients to help stop the spread of the virus.

At the start of the pandemic, the Indonesian Government implemented a nationwide stay-at-home order. These restrictions have since been relaxed, despite rising case numbers in Indonesia, a country which is one of the worst hit countries in the South-East Asia region.



SHARING HEALTH KNOWLEDGE IN A PANDEMIC

In times of social distancing and lockdowns, health leaders are finding innovative ways to spread life-changing health knowledge and care.

The work of Community Health Leaders—sharing basic health, hygiene and nutrition education with community members—is more important than ever amidst the coronavirus pandemic. In India, Indonesia and Bangladesh, prior to Government-imposed lockdown restrictions, health leaders conducted hand washing demonstrations and general COVID-19 awareness-raising.

In recent months, health leaders have turned to digital technology to spread messages of coronavirus prevention, whilst still social distancing. In Indonesia, health leaders filmed videos about the importance of handwashing and how to use face masks to limit the spread of the disease. The videos were then shared with the local community via WhatsApp and text message.

Opportunity's health leaders in India have also utilised Interactive Voice Response messages to share virus awareness and monitor outbreaks.



➤ Oneh, a health leader in Indonesia, demonstrates good handwashing techniques. Photo: supplied



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: "THE SHADOW PANDEMIC"

For every three months of lockdown due to COVID-19, an estimated 15 million people – mostly women and girls – have suffered from gender-based violence, globally.

Since the start of the pandemic, multiple international agencies and national activists have raised a red flag about the increase in gender-based violence (GBV). In India, the National Commission for Women reported a rise of 94 per cent in complaint cases where women have been abused in their homes during lockdown.

Opportunity's program partner in India, My Choices Foundation, has responded with new approaches to preventing two types of GBV –



➤ Gender-based violence is on the rise in India due to lockdowns. © Kim Landy

domestic violence and child trafficking. This has included launching a national counselling hotline for victims of domestic violence and experimenting with radio as a medium for building deeper understanding of GBV in rural communities.

With India now listed as the country with the third highest number of infections, GBV is set to remain as the shadow pandemic for some time. My Choices Foundation is planning for increased demand of their intervention services as well as increased need for prevention and education on the issue.

Breaking the cycle

Growing up in Oebelo, Indonesia, Marta's family depended on income from selling salt to meet their daily needs. At 15, Marta dropped out of school to help her parents with their business.

“My parents were poor so they could not send us to school. All I wanted was to graduate from high school,” Marta said.

“I felt regret but what can we do, our parents were poor so we should help them. I didn’t have any dreams.”

Today, with a family of her own, Marta has continued the family business making and selling salt. However, life has been tough for her four children – only one of whom was able to graduate from high school.

Two of Marta’s adult children live with a disability and require daily care. Her son Viki has a brain disorder and her daughter has vocal cord disruptions, impeding her ability to speak. With limited access to healthcare and support, neither children were able to finish primary school.

“Viki started to have convulsions when he was nine; he is 22 years old now. He was having convulsions day and night for three months,” Marta said. “We have been to many hospitals to examine him. He didn’t even finish his first grade of elementary because of his illness.”

During this time, Marta struggled to afford her children’s healthcare fees. With no health insurance, the family used what income they made from their business to afford the expenses.

“We sell it [salt] in the market, in our home, everywhere so we can pay for the

hospital,” Marta said. “I was worried and hopeless, I wanted to give up because it was so difficult to earn.”

In Indonesia, 9.4 per cent – or close to 25 million people – live below the national poverty line, with a further 20 per cent vulnerable to falling into poverty¹.

Families living in rural and remote areas are often the poorest and are less likely to have access to the tools they need to leave poverty behind, such as healthcare, education and essential services.

A small loan can be the first step to moving out of poverty. However, most families will need to go through multiple loan cycles as they build their businesses. Simon Lynch, Opportunity’s Community Development and Indonesia Director, said Opportunity’s program partners



Marta holds cooking salt ready for sale in Oebelo, Indonesia.
© Sara Bolst.

provide larger loans to their clients at each cycle.

“This allows them to build confidence in the client’s ability to pay while ensuring that they do not overburden clients with loans that are too big,” Simon said.

“When you have few assets, it is extremely difficult to start or build a business.”

“When nobody else trusts you enough to lend you money and an organisation rewards your hard work and loyalty by providing you with a larger loan each cycle, you will do all you can to maintain and build the relationship.”

“Many people assume that people living in poverty pay back loans because they fear negative consequences associated with not paying, but the reality is that they pay back because of their desire to grow their business.”

Today, Marta is on her sixth loan cycle through Opportunity International Australia’s program partner TLM. Financial support allows her to purchase raw salt, firewood and materials for her business.

The raw salt is cooked for three to four hours until it becomes cooking salt and sold within her community. But Marta doesn’t work alone.

“My husband sells salt in the market, when I am tired, he replaces me. We share the work,” she said. “I wake up at 7 or 8am because I only make salt and take care of my children. Sometimes wash the clothes.”

“If we have enough capital, we buy 20 or 30 sacks of raw salt and start to make salt until we are all sold out. We sell it every day – on the roadside and in the market.”

Despite the success of her business, Marta’s family still struggle from time to time.

“If nothing is sold then we don’t eat at all,” Marta said. “Usually when that happens, I feel disappointed. When it rains and we cannot go out selling salt, then we don’t know how to buy food for our children.”



But on days when the family experience an abundance of profit, Marta always invests it back into the business.

“I donate some to my church and some I used to buy more material to make salt, like raw salt and firewood for cooking.”

Having access to financial services helps families to build a sustainable business and provides the opportunity to produce additional income and build assets.

“This brings stability, a safety net against an incident such as a medical emergency that would draw you back into poverty, and the opportunity to improve nutrition, education and your overall quality of life,” Simon said.

Looking to the future, Marta hopes to continue growing her business and save for her children’s futures.

“I wish for a bigger loan so I can stock more raw salt like maybe 100 sacks of it and still have some to save for the children so they can get a proper education,” she said.

Today, Viki has stopped experiencing convulsions and both Viki and his sister help with the family business. However, both still require daily care from Marta.

“I can only wish the best for them all. I don’t want them to go away, I want them to live with us because with their condition, it will be hard for them to live with other people,” she said.

For her youngest child, Riana who is five years old, Marta hopes she will have a brighter future. “I wish I can do the best for her. I am preparing her to enter school so she can do better,” she said.

Opportunity’s work in Indonesia is supported by the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). ●

Empower a woman, change a community

When a woman receives a small loan, she opens the door to greater economic participation.

She has access to the financial means, financial literacy and support to grow her small business, provide for her children and become a decision-maker within her family.

Opportunity is dedicated to seeing women empowered through each of our programs: microfinance, health, education and safety. We are currently reaching 6.7 million families with small loans throughout Asia – 95 per cent of them are to women.

When a woman runs her own business, she starts to build more connections in her community. Her success benefits not just her, but her family and community too. This leads to a greater mobility outside the house, a sense of social connectedness, increased confidence, hope and dignity. ●



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“ Access to financial services means women are empowered to make important decisions for themselves and for the family.”

– Alexandra Doyle, Opportunity's Program Lead and Evaluation Manager.



©Sarah Gray

The power of digital finance

Accessing and managing money is one of the biggest challenges for people living in poverty – yet it is essential for them to unlock basic services. As we move towards an increasingly digitalised world, how do we ensure they aren't left behind? Opportunity International's Digital Financial Services team explains.

Digital financial inclusion is driving the next wave of growth in the microfinance industry. Increasing access to smart phones is seeing a gradual shift from cash to digital finance – for school fees, ecommerce, savings, credit and more.

In the recent COVID-19 lockdown conditions, digital financial services have become critical for many. Yet access to mobile phones, the Internet and simple and effective digital solutions continue to be out of reach for millions living in poverty; something we need to address.

Mobile phones and the Internet increasingly offer an alternative to debit and credit cards for making direct payments from an account. For the first time in 2019, digital transactions accounted for the majority of mobile money flows. The number of registered mobile money accounts reached more than 1 billion in 95 countries and accounted for US\$1.9 billion transacted every day¹.

'Digital financial inclusion' – digital access to and use of financial services by excluded and underserved populations² – will be essential for those living in poverty.

BARRIERS TO DIGITAL FINANCE

People living in poverty are typically risk averse, prefer cash and lack trust in digital finance. In India, the economy has traditionally been dominated by cash. The country has the second largest unbanked population in the world – 190 million – and of those with an account, almost half are inactive³. Low population density and poor



© Opportunity International US

infrastructure in rural areas makes it costly to reach clients through a traditional brick-and-mortar model.

Another barrier is a lack of financial literacy. Those in rural areas, in particular women, are more likely to be illiterate and with lower numeracy skills. Mark Daniels, Asia Programs Director for Opportunity International Australia, said word of mouth plays an important role too.

"If others in the community have found their digital interactions to be complicated or unreliable, this will have a profound effect on others' willingness to engage with digital services," Daniels said.

"We may think of those who have less as having simpler financial lives, but studies have shown that in fact the opposite is true. Poorer households often use a large number of different financial instruments and engage in various often complicated strategies to smooth their consumption."

"Technology-enabled solutions are therefore key in reaching and serving these populations sustainably and bringing the most marginalised groups – primarily women – into financial inclusion."



INCREASING ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

Digital finance can lead to greater financial inclusion and increase access to basic services for people in poverty by:



- reducing the risk of loss and theft posed by cash-based transactions
- allowing customers to transact in irregular, tiny amounts, helping them to manage their characteristically uneven income
- increasing access to formal financial services such as payments, transfers, savings, credit and insurance
- contributing to economic growth and stability.

Source: World Bank

DIGITAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION FOR ALL

Opportunity International Australia's partners continue to move towards using digital technology to make financial services more accessible and to give clients more freedom with transactions.

Paperless methods of data collection and cashless transactions, whilst still in their infancy, enable our partners to operate more efficiently and safely. It increases security as loan officers are less likely to be targeted for robberies, and safeguards health as cash can be a means by which communicable disease is spread from person to person.

Globally, Opportunity International is testing and developing innovations such as Interactive Voice Response (IVP), to encourage low-income, illiterate women to use mobile phones for their finances. A recent pilot in Ghana and Uganda used IVP technology to send clients automated audio messages reminding them to save, or about upcoming loan repayments.

"Low-income women often understand and use mobile phones as a tool to call relatives but using mobile phones for their banking needs can be uncomfortable and uncertain," said Rosa Wang, Global Director, Digital Financial Services, Opportunity International. "When we introduce a new digital service and we are trying to deepen usage, we incorporate elements of digital financial literacy to help the clients become comfortable and confident."

Overall, the pilot saw greater engagement rates with women clients, and encouraged positive savings behaviour.

"As IVP is further developed, women will gain access to digital tools that allow them to send and receive messages in their local dialect, which will help increase women's confidence and capabilities in using mobile phones."

LOOKING AHEAD

Amid lockdowns and social distancing measures, the coronavirus pandemic will accelerate the digitalisation of the microfinance sector. Many institutions have taken steps to reduce exposure to the virus through personal protective equipment and social distancing in group meetings. However, Daniella Hawkins, Programme Coordinator for Opportunity International, said those with digital channels will be more resilient.

"Mobile banking offers a fast and contactless means of making payments and transferring funds from the safety of the customer's home," Hawkins said. "Looking at a number of Opportunity International's partners in Africa reveals that between February and May of 2020 the number of transactions carried out via mobile banking increased by 16 per cent."

"The pandemic therefore provides an opportunity for financial institutions to assess their digitisation journey, identify areas for development and implement changes that are gender-sensitive and client-centric." ●

RENJU REACHES WOMEN WITH DIGITAL FINANCE

"Now that we have the tablet, we are able to add more members quickly and meet their needs fast."

Renju spends her days on a moped, driving through the dusty villages in Thrissur, India. A loan officer with Opportunity's program partner ESAF, Renju meets with groups of women to make loan repayments and deposits into their savings accounts.

Technology is helping women access much-needed financial services in their communities, instead of travelling to bank branches. Renju uses a tablet to verify identities with just an iris or fingerprint scan for women without formal identification. The tablet also logs each transaction digitally and sends an SMS alert to the client's mobile phones verifying that their deposit was processed.

Renju is proud of the change she is able to make in the lives of others. "I wish to see my clients own a factory or company and flourish in their businesses," Renju said. "I hope with their income they could raise the standard of living."

"When we introduce a new digital service... we incorporate elements of digital financial literacy to help the clients become comfortable and confident."

1. GSMA Association, 2019 State of the Industry Report on Mobile Money
2. CGAP, Digital Financial Inclusion: Implications for Customers, Regulators, Supervisors, and Standard-Setting Bodies, 2015
3. World Bank, The Global Findex Database 2017: Measuring Financial Inclusion and the Fin-tech Revolution.

A single life changed means everything

After 14 years of faithful leadership within Opportunity, Rob Dunn, the former CEO of Opportunity International Australia and current Global Executive Director, is retiring. Here he reflects on his journey.

Q: Brief background. Where did you work before Opportunity?

Rob Dunn: I have an accounting and finance background. Having started with Price Waterhouse, as it was then called, I was able to work in New York and then London. Before Opportunity I was CFO of Patrick Corporation for more than a decade and that had its moments, I can tell you!

Q: What led you to Opportunity and the NGO world?

RD: I believe God did, although I wouldn't have been so confident about that at the time. I've always had a strong desire to make a difference in the world.

I joined Opportunity in late 2006 as the CFO after a very intense year at Patrick. I figured I'd be there for 18 months, two years max. Just a chance to recharge the batteries and give back a bit.

Everything about Opportunity was new to me. I knew nothing about international development and only corporate finance, not retail finance. So, it was a great chance to learn and to do something meaningful. Also, importantly, I liked my new boss, Paul Peters. He was young, intelligent and visionary. He thought a few people in Australia could change the world. That was pretty exciting!

Q: Why did you believe microfinance was a worthwhile poverty alleviation intervention?

RD: I love the idea of a sustainable business approach to solving a huge

social problem. I had heard about microfinance through a man at our church, Dr Harry Edwards, who was a friend of my parents. Harry was an economics professor and then a politician and he became the first chair of Opportunity Australia. Harry talked about the impact of the small loan, the hand up that people needed. Add [Opportunity founder] David Bussau's entrepreneurial flair for microenterprise development and you had a potent formula to change the world.

Q: How have you seen it change over the years?

RD: Fifteen years ago, Opportunity's partners in Asia had a few hundred thousand clients in total. Now they have around 7 million loan clients and more than 12 million savings clients. Then, we didn't have a large program in India and there was only one major MFI in the northern half of that country. We focussed on that unserved area where most of the population lives, and now our partners operate in more than half the districts of India.

Fifteen years ago, the vast majority of people in the countries we work in had no access to formal banking. Now, most people have bank accounts and microfinance can take place using digital transfers.

The extent of poverty in countries like India, Indonesia and the Philippines has dramatically changed in 15 years. Opportunity has always targeted the marginalised where life is bleak, and it has sought to help people flourish. The job is far from done.

Q: What other factors need to be in play for microfinance to be most effective?

RD: It takes more than finance to lift people out of poverty. There's no point

in working hard to enable your children to be educated if you have no access to a school. Or if there's no health services to arrest sickness which could cause a family to fall back into poverty.

That is why we provide health services in India, Indonesia and Bangladesh; why we work with Opportunity's education finance program to help build effective, affordable schools; and why we help keep women and girls safe.

Q: What have been the biggest challenges you've faced regarding microfinance and how did you overcome them?

RD: Most of the big challenges that come to mind were outside our control. I'll never forget the impact of superstorm Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in 2013 which destroyed huge numbers of businesses and houses in the Southern Philippines. Or trying to figure out which partners in India we might not be able to save in the aftermath of the crisis caused when the Andhra Pradesh government effectively banned microfinance in 2010. Or the same thing six years later when the Indian government surprised everyone by declaring certain bank notes could no longer be used in commerce. And now COVID-19 is again causing the most pain to the poorest.

Q: What was your journey with Opportunity?

RD: Initially, I was the CFO of Opportunity Australia. That was when we set up Opportunity's program in India. We established Opportunity in India—an investment company called Dia Vikas Capital—and obtained the required licenses for foreign investment. We interviewed leaders of countless potential partners and started forming alliances with microfinance institutions,



or MFIs. At one time we were forming three new funding alliances with MFIs every five months. It was exhausting and exhilarating.

After 18 months, I became CEO. I ran the team at Opportunity Australia for the next decade. In August 2017, I became the Global Executive Director to coordinate activity between Opportunity in Australia, Canada, Germany, UK and US.

Q: What led to the Global Executive Director role?

RD: The different parts of Opportunity decided they would be better off if they worked more closely together and adopted the operating model Opportunity Australia had in Asia—significant influence, rather than control of the MFI. So, it made sense that I help coordinate the group as it embraced this new operating model.

Q: You obviously wanted to stay within Opportunity. Why?

RD: It's clear to me this is the work God has wanted me to do. I've been privileged

to work with absolute legends: people on our staff now and those who have gone before and particularly those who lead partners and overseas programs. These people have all changed the world. They live for others and are my heroes.

Q: As a global enterprise, what reach does Opportunity International have?

RD: Through our partners in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Opportunity serves more than 15 million families. More than 95 per cent of the clients are women.

But the big numbers don't tell the whole story. Everyone who has met a client and heard her story knows that a single life changed means everything. Opportunity is a major development network and we have always been at the forefront of development innovation.

Q: What role will microfinance play in a post-COVID-19 world?

RD: COVID-19 is both a health crisis and an economic crisis. Oxfam estimates¹ that half a billion people could be pushed back into poverty. Save the Children estimates² that nearly 10 million children

might never return to formal education. Opportunity's innovative approach to poverty alleviation and support for education will be critical to help bring light to those whose world is getting darker by the week.

COVID-19 has reinforced the importance of digital operations. We have long known that the idea of sitting on the mat handing over banknotes in a 25 minute meeting is the equivalent of standing in a bank queue for 25 minutes. When did you last put up with that? In lockdown it isn't even a possibility. Post COVID-19, everyone's operations need to be fully digital.

Q: What now for Rob Dunn?

RD: There are four generations of my family that I really want to spend more time with. I have some board roles and I enjoy that. I will also be following the challenges and successes of Opportunity International as it helps make a better world.

¹ The Economist, 2 May 2020 edition

² The Economist, 18 July 2020 edition

Sangeeta's sewing success

“This is my dream, to help women who are in need by giving them work in my shop.” Thanks to a small loan, Sangeeta's dream of starting her own tailoring business came true.

Growing up in Nagpur, India, Sangeeta left school early to enter the workforce. There was barely enough food and her family just managed to get by. Sangeeta needed to earn money, so she began sewing at a local business. She worked seven days a week mending dresses and used her income to help provide for her family.

“I brought groceries for home as we were not able to eat good food,” she said.

Eventually, Sangeeta's hard work began to pay off and she built a loyal customer base. “I provided door-to-door service and then after a few days people came to know about me and started giving me clothes [to sew].”

Now married and with a young child of her own, Sangeeta needed to earn enough to provide for her family. With a loan through Opportunity International Australia's program partner ESAF, she purchased a sewing machine, table and some dress material to start her own business.

The mother turned entrepreneur is one of the lucky few. In India, women's participation in the workforce is falling. In 2019, only 21 per cent of women in India were working compared to 30 per cent more than a decade ago¹.

Many women are discouraged from working outside of the home due to cultural norms and instead prioritise unpaid housework and care work. COVID-19 could also worsen women's labour force participation rate. When jobs become scarce, families tend to send men out to earn, and women stay behind.

Despite these challenges, Sangeeta's business has grown. Today she has four sewing machines and employs two local

“All those who are in need, I can help them. There are many women who are in great need.”

Sangeeta and her son at her tailoring business in Nagpur, India. © Kim Landy

women. Sangeeta earns more than five times the amount per dress than when she worked for an employer.

“These days we eat good food, our living standard has risen. I invested the money in savings and also purchased a plot [of land],” she said. “Before marriage the situation was very tough but now everything is fine.”

In the future, Sangeeta hopes to hire more women and invest in new machinery. She wants to give other women the chance to earn a living independently and with dignity.

“All those who are in need, I can help them. There are many women who are in great need,” Sangeeta said. “Women are not allowed to come out of their homes and work, so if they work under a woman, they will be more comfortable.”

Sangeeta is also the leader of her ‘sangam’ or loan group. Thirty local women meet each week to access loan disbursements and repayments.

The meetings provide an opportunity for women to share concerns and support each other. Some group meetings also provide financial literacy and women's empowerment training, giving women more agency in financial matters in the home.

“If there is a problem in someone's house we all gather together to handle this situation,” Sangeeta said. “If someone is not having money then I help them by lending them money.”

Through this leadership role, Sangeeta has helped other women to grow their businesses, such as Raksha.

“Raksha used to do household work but she was not satisfied with that,” Sangeeta said. “When she was not able to pay for her child's school fees, she would come and ask for money.”

Raksha had started a small business to earn additional income but only had a few customers. Through the sangam she met other local women and expanded to new customers.

“So we decided to help her by giving her loan on credit and meanwhile she joined the sangam,” Sangeeta said. “We thought of helping her by not just giving her money but by giving her business.”

Looking to the future, Sangeeta hopes her children will follow their dreams.

“Whatever they [my children] want to become I will help them to achieve it. I will not pressure my children to become a doctor or engineer,” she said. “I will try and help them to fulfil their dreams, whatever they want to become.” ●



> Prabhathi herds sheep to earn a living and used a small loan to buy fodder, Udaipurwati, India. © Kim Landy

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Graffiti in Bihar, India. People living in poverty already struggled with daily basic needs. COVID-19 has created uncertainty and anxiety for millions. Photo: © Matthew Smeal