KOWDI

an initiative to improve livelihoods in urban slums
Kowdi is a traditional North Karnataka handicraft in which bits and pieces of cloth are joined together using a simple running stitch that creates designs and patterns over the cloth. For ages women in these communities have been upcycling old clothes into large quilts, that are a mainstay in their homes.

Migrant workers living in slums in Bangalore continue this tradition. It is not uncommon to see women doing kowdi in their free time, especially older women or women with ailments who are not otherwise able to contribute to the household.

The nature of the craft has meant that people only make kowdi for their own use and have never seen it as a marketable product or skill. The mission of Kowdi Kutumba is to develop this talent into a means of livelihood.
Since June 2014 the SELCO Foundation has been working with a group of women on a pilot project for Kowdi. Through a step by step process that included multiple engagement and design sessions with individual and small groups of women we began making simpler, smaller products of better quality and quantity.

The women collected scrap pieces of cloth from tailors and sorted out different types of materials, colour combinations and prints. They selected their favourite pieces of material according to their preferences and started making Kowdi. We provided templates for the non-quilt pieces they made, and joined the separate parts with a sewing machine. Using their creativity and a little bit of value add from our designer, the result surprised and excited them to move further.

We created the brand Kowdi Kutumba and sold and marketed the products online and at local exhibitions. The response from the public was very encouraging. Within a few months it was clear that there was a market and immense potential for Kowdi Kutumba to grow into an enterprise.
The first three months were spent in groundwork, community organization, kowdi skill assessment & training, design & prototyping products and market analysis.

We participated in two exhibitions in Bangalore, received one bulk order and sold the majority of our products through a fixed stall in our office premises.

We’ve sold over 80% of the total products produced during the pilot. Based on demand and feedback we have also created a range in silk and are working on a range for men as well.

We have recently started exploring the retail space and have begun retailing our products at Shop for a Cause in Bangalore.
Impact

The large majority of working adults in this community are involved in unskilled manual labour. Mostly, laying concrete and working on construction sites nearby. The work is highly irregular and strenuous which means they can work only 3-4 days a week. The women make around Rs. 200 a day. Few work as domestic help where they make Rs. 500-1000 per month. Women who have young children, ailments or are elderly are unable to earn a livelihood.

Production of kowdi began in September. The graph reflects the amount earned by 25 women doing kowdi on a piece rate basis over a period of three months. The pieces are of three standardized sizes small, medium and large. The rate per piece ranges from Rs. 25-96 based on size and quality. Each piece is graded on an A, B, C grading system based on quality of work.

The women had no restrictions on time and no mandatory minimum on number of pieces they need to complete. The women were given the flexibility to work at their own pace, in their homes, and at a time that was suitable for them. 60% of the women earned between Rs. 900-1800 as an additional source of livelihood through kowdi. The women have the capacity to earn up to Rs. 3000 per month if our production requirements increase.
For the Kowdi project to have a sustained positive impact on these vulnerable women there are still many steps to be taken. Using what we’ve learnt from the pilot experience there are a few aspects that will take priority in the immediate future.

**Livelihood Centre**
As of now, the women work in their homes where there is no proper space or lighting. A livelihood centre near their homes would be the ideal place to gather for work and trainings. Using solar energy for the lighting and machines would make this space an energy efficient production centre for Kowdi Kutumba.

**Market Linkages**
Creating a demand for Kowdi across India and abroad has been a goal since the inception of the project. Market linkages will be key to the growth and sustainability of Kowdi Kutumba.

**Training & Development**
Capacity building for the women will remain our primary focus. Not just in terms of design and quality but as also tailoring, bookkeeping, so that end to end production and distribution can be undertaken by the women themselves.