# 'Poverty is one of the major reasons behind our social degradation.'



**Kubair A. Shirazee, co-founder of the social initiative, Peace Through Prosperity, speaks to Javeria Shakil in this exclusive interview.**

**What is Peace Through Prosperity (PTP)?**

Peace Through Prosperity is a social venture, that provides and promotes an entrepreneurial approach to poverty alleviation at the bottom most rung of the enterprise ladder.

We work with entrepreneurs of circumstances (micro-entrepreneurs) helping them develop skills, behaviors and gain knowledge that will enable them to rise above the poverty line, make more money, create wealth, jobs and reduce the frictions that exist in society because of poverty and the problems associated with it.

**How did PTP start?**

Some five years ago we began researching reasons for the sharp increase in extremism, radicalization, criminality, the general rise of the 'right', gang wars, etc. What started off as a curious peak into the proverbial rabbit hole in 2009 led to our Mini-MBA program for street-based entrepreneurs of circumstances towards the end of 2012.

The underlying premise of our approach is that people living on or below the poverty line in the developing world suffer from not only poverty but lack of access to justice, opportunities, lack of social mobility, lack of their own ability to influence positive change while society extends them little dignity, if any. We can address these issue by the creation of opportunities, jobs and wealth in society.

**How was the idea of a mini-MBA program for cobblers conceived? What are its basic features?**

Back in 2008 when I was running my own business, I needed to upskill myself to be better equipped to grow my enterprise. However, most popular programs, including executive MBA programs, didn't offer the tailor-made approach I needed. Then I found a program at Cranfield University's School of Management called the Business Growth Program which is essentially a mini-MBA for business-owner managers; the main part of the program runs for 11 weeks. During the program, you create a business plan tailored to your business and learn the tools that you would need to better manage and grow your business. It was short, focused, worked well with my schedule as an entrepreneur and made a difference to my business.

When we started the exploration phase for PTP's programs, we concluded that the micro-entrepreneurs lacked skills and know-how, not ambition, determination or willingness to put in the hours. The majority do not know who their target audience is, how to reach them, what customer retention can do for their business, how to build on their strengths and more. They are totally engrossed in working 'in' their business with little time to step back and work 'on' their business. So we designed our own program – the Mini-MBA – and selected street cobblers to field test our approach, curriculum and its direct and indirect impact.

Our Mini-MBA is a five-day program, with a two-hour 'class' every day in which we deliver practical and immediately applicable business tools, knowledge and skills. It is followed by 12 weeks of one-on-one coaching and consulting of one hour each week at our students' place of business. We go and sit with our micro-entrepreneur at his thia and work with him to address his business challenges. We like to think of ourselves as the Mckinseys or Accentures for the impoverished; who can't afford to have consultancy services although I think they need them the most. The one-on-one sessions are the key to our ability to enable our micro-entrepreneurs to transform their business. And in a true Agile fashion they are an invaluable opportunity for us to learn, adapt and evolve our program.

Since our launch in Karachi we have extended our program beyond street cobblers and have introduced our Mini-MBA for six trades: street cobblers, vegetable sellers, fruit vendors, barbers, chaat wallas and juice wallas.

**Could you tell me more about this 'true Agile fashion'?**

Agile is a method where requirements and solutions evolve through collaboration between self-organizing, cross-functional teams. It promotes adaptive planning, evolutionary design and delivery, it is a time-boxed iterative approach and encourages rapid and flexible response to change. It is a conceptual framework that promotes foreseen tight iterations throughout the development cycle. It is a natural fit for the challenges we are trying to overcome and the issues we are attempting to address.

**How did you decide that you will apply 'Agile' to a non-technical project?**

By introducing models and methodologies from across different practices and industries we have managed to gain better insight into the drivers, catalysts and agents of change.

A soft systems approach has enabled us to dissect the issues better, gain better insight and Agile has enabled us to experiment and design programs that work and evolve them should they not. Its managing transformation at a formidable scale and our application of models, tools and methodologies from across different sectors is the innovation we bring to our projects. Needless to say social change is desperate for innovation.

**Which city did you start from?**

We rolled out our Mini-MBA program in semi-urban localities in South Punjab before moving to 'Pindi and Islamabad and later to Haripur, Dara Adam Khel in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. We surveyed and studied 444 micro-entrepreneurs and then took 113 of them through our Mini-MBA program. We experimented with the design, delivery and evaluation of our program in less complex environments before committing to our Karachi project, which we started in March 2014. To date we have surveyed and analyzed close to 400 micro-entrepreneurs across ten marginalized neighborhoods in Karachi and are going to take 250-275 of them through our Mini-MBA program from June 2014.

**What results have you achieved so far?**

The results we've had so far are mind-blowing and have validated our hypothesis: 113 micro-entrepreneurs who have completed our Mini-MBA program have demonstrated an average revenue growth of 50% and profitability growth of 92% over a 4-month period.

**How did this happen?**

From the get-go our strategy has been to teach skills, tools and techniques that will have a direct and immediate impact on the participant's business. As you'd expect from any worthy MBA program, we cover a range of topics; from hygiene, etiquettes, customer behavior, financial planning and marketing to business-growth strategies.

Our micro-entrepreneurs learned that maintaining a clean environment, engaging with their customers politely and developing relationships with their customers are easy and big wins and help them get repeat business, bigger tips and gain market share.

Not surprisingly we discovered that most micro-entrepreneurs kept rough accounts or no accounts whatsoever. We teach them to maintain basic financial records that give them unparalleled transparency of which products or services carry the highest margins, where they are bleeding money, where to cut down on expenses etc.

We teach them how to make the most of their strengths in context to their environment, how to identify opportunities and follow different pricing strategies. For example, if Ahmed Gul is known for his organic juice stand (no added sugar or watered-down servings) and has a particular set of clientele, Ahmed Gul can charge a higher price for his products and earn higher margins on fewer glasses sold. Alternatively, Ahmed Gul could quite easily be a numbers-churner by charging less and getting more customers.

We also concentrate quite a bit on basic behavior and communication skills. For example, if someone comes up to them, they should make eye contact and have a conversation. If a customer is waiting, they should not ignore the customer, tell him/her they will be with them in a minute, and generally how to be courteous and engaging.

**How is your organization different from other NGOs?**

We don't consider our organization an NGO. We think of it as a social startup. None of us are from the development sector or have any experience of having worked for NGOs. What sets us apart is our methodology, our attitude towards micro-failure, our ability to learn, adapt and redeploy at pace and, most importantly, our desire to have an immediate impact. If we promise someone that we are going to change his/her life, we want that transformation to begin there and then not a week, month or a year later.

Another differentiator is how we view our own team and what we do for their development; by equipping our field team with skills and tools that are unique to the market we are not only introducing new tools for thinking at various levels in society but creating data informed knowledge workers at various levels across sectors in society. We are increasing the market worth of our employees should they decide to move on. Our entire team is SCRUM/ Agile ready, how many software houses in Pakistan can claim that, let alone any NGOs.

**What are your future projects?**

Karachi's complexities and needs have opened up a whole new bunch of avenues for us to explore. We have recently launched our second program which is being spearheaded by our co-founder Sahar Zaidi-Shirazee. 'Kitchen Garden' is a precursor to establishing an urban farming cooperative in Karachi. It's about food security and compliments our overall poverty alleviation strategy quite well.

We provide selected households in lower-income areas with grow boxes. The eligibility criteria is that the household must be a family with kids, so the kids get to see the cycle of life, learn from it and enjoy the fruits of the family's labor. The second is that there should be more than one woman in the house because womenfolk, be they homemakers or working mothers, have more responsibilities than men do. We don't want to lump another burden on an already super-busy mum, wife or daughter. The third criterion is they should have access to sunlight, be it a small courtyard, ledge or roof where they can place the grow boxes.

We provide the households grow boxes with quick to harvest vegetables such as tomatoes, bitter gourd, green chilies, cucumber and green beans. Once these folks have proven to us that they have a green thumb, we will introduce them to 'high-value niche' vegetables and help them sell those to up-market restaurants and hotels. This way, they will not only grow vegetables that they can consume, but grow quick to harvest vegetables that they can sell and use to supplement their incomes. We are currently experimenting with 50 families in Korangi that are growing vegetables in 100 grow boxes.

**How can people help your social venture?**

We want people to do whatever they feel comfortable with, to be as involved or as distant as they like. If blogging and social media is your thing then so be it; if you're an academic, let's research and analyze our data together; if you're a grass-roots activists, help us mobilize beneficiaries; if you're a super-busy entrepreneur yourself then we'll settle for your hard-earned cash; if you have an epic and inspirational story to share like Mr. Abdullah Chotanni, we'd love to have you over as an motivational speaker. In brief if you have the desire to contribute we will find you a means to do so that will be universally beneficial for all! S