

# Trading for Rehabilitation

Delhi-based MESH helps traditional crafts artisans with disabilities to a better life



Executive Secretary Jacqueline Bonney at MESH's Delhi headquarters.

Jacqueline J. Bonney MBE sits behind her desk in a showroom piled high with beautifully made bedspreads, cushion covers, tablecloths and papier-mâché products, and launches into an enthusiastic description of the work of MESH.

Started 25 years ago in Delhi by a group of North American expatriate wives, MESH — or Maximizing Employment to Serve the Handicapped — provides opportunities for disabled people and their dependents, especially those affected by leprosy, to be rehabilitated in order to become self-sufficient.

"The fact is that there are a huge number of people in India affected by leprosy who don't need treatment anymore but whose lives have been turned completely upside down by the disease," says Bonney, MESH's executive secretary for the past 10 years. "It is necessary to find ways of helping them."

MESH's founders focused their initial efforts on a leprosy colony north of Delhi, where they encouraged men to weave and to raise poultry. Today, MESH buys and sells handicrafts and poultry from some 45 autonomous groups of disabled and leprosy-affected persons all over the country.

All products are purchased at prices suppliers set. MESH then adds transport costs and a 15% service charge to come up with its selling price.

Nearly 80% of MESH's handicraft business is export, with products shipped to wholesalers in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Canada, the United States, Australia and elsewhere. Its main customers are U.K.-based TLM Trading, the trading arm of The Leprosy Mission, and IM Soir Sweden, an

organization working to change attitudes toward persons with mental and physical disabilities.

## PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

As MESH has become more attuned to keeping its overseas customers happy with well designed and marketable products, business has grown. Sales topped 10 million rupees for the first time in fiscal 2004-05 and are expected to grow 10% this year.

Gone are the days when clients would take whatever MESH had to offer, only to end up with piles of tablecloths they couldn't sell. Now MESH is increasingly buying to order

— and buying products that have benefited from professional design input from the customer.

In a project begun two years ago, funded by the Swedish Mission Council through IM Soir Sweden, two designers have been working with a number of MESH suppliers. As well as coming up with designs, they help local artisans develop new techniques that will increase their product range, teach them about making swatches and about systematic labeling and coding of products to help them operate on a more business-like footing.

**"Indians love bright colors but these just don't work in places like Sweden."**



Simultaneously, TLM Trading decided to design its own products and work with MESH to identify the groups best suited to make them.

"It's the way the commercial world does it," says Bonney. "Benetton doesn't go to its seamstresses and say, 'Design us a T-shirt.' They give them a design and have them make it."

For suppliers that continue to develop products by themselves, MESH evaluates their marketability and makes suggestions for improving them.

"There's a real issue with color," Bonney says. "Indians love bright colors, but these just don't work in places like Sweden where the light is so different. So we try to teach them what works and what doesn't."

## Reference

To see an online catalog of products handled by MESH, visit [www.mesh-crafts.com](http://www.mesh-crafts.com)