

# Crafts, Enterprise and Inter-sectoral Partnership in East and South Africa

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**D**uring the past two decades, the social and economic conditions for artwork have been radically transformed. Western aesthetic standards and transformations in art markets and culture industries have spread around the world, generating a drive towards production of tourist crafts. One of the hardest tasks is that of countering adverse perceptions of crafts. There is a plethora of tourist curios that create an impression that African crafts are tacky, stylized, repetitive, sentimental and lack artistic merit. But crafts can also be richly decorative, inventive, environmentally enhancing and personally fulfilling. Although the quality of craft products varies, there are examples of skill and invention combining tradition with innovation and giving expression to cultural exchange. Preconceptions, prejudices and assumptions about crafts must be challenged together with the notion that they are merely commodities.

Craft activity is central to the lives of many African people. Indigenous crafts, such as textiles, beadwork and basketry, must be nurtured as the basis for the evolution of design and artistic skills. It is vital that the craft economy continues to develop, to enable crafts people to become economically viable and earn a proper return for what they make. 'Profit' is not a dirty word and the contribution of the marketplace to developing standards and public awareness of crafts must be recognized.

While economic advancement has been the catalyst for increased craft activity, craft production is important not just for economic reasons but also for the contribution it makes to national cultural identity more than economic reasons; it contributes to national cultural identity. This identity evolves constantly as crafts respond to and assimilate local and international influences. Distinguishing between their social, cultural and economic benefits is not the issue. It is more important to consider the roles of crafts persons, entrepreneurs, educational institutions and external agencies institutions and how they interact.

During the colonial period western heritage and tradition was forged in many art-training institutions in Africa and little attention was paid to indigenous knowledge systems. The development of arts and creative skills in the formal schooling system has historically been marginalised. Inequalities in access to design education and training opportunities in the tertiary sector have yet to be addressed and enterprising, committed individuals and non-governmental organizations have been left to fill the gap.

Numerous craft projects have been set up throughout Africa to alleviate poverty. Although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have provided practical skills training for this purpose, too many initiatives fail to consider relationships between crafts people and the surrounding communities or whether their work has a positive local impact. Invariably, crafts are produced for the cultural market place that have no function or meaning within the makers' lives. A more integrated approach to design education and training is needed that embraces and imparts practical skills and entrepreneurial know-how together with understanding of the role creative thinking can play in addressing socio-cultural concerns. A system of design education, that fosters inter-sectoral partnerships, ought to be established that links learning to living conditions.

Effective partnerships should prioritise place a 'premium on knowledge of local circumstances – and acknowledge the diversity of community structures, cultures, traditions and needs. Since practice is local, much of the knowledge needed to plan and guide it is contextually specific, intuitive tacit and intrinsic to the settings of daily practice. A perverse effect of ignoring local knowledge is that too many projects — and educational institutions — tend to focus on solutions to poorly defined identified problems.

Socially responsive design education and practice is not just about commodity production, it also embraces the conditions in which people live. Design is not the product – it is the concept, the ability to transform ideas into tangibles that meet human needs and wants.

Human behaviour is determined by far more complex and interesting factors than economic rationalization. Economic growth is not an end in itself. It is the social dimension — culture as defined by UNESCO in 1982 as “the whole complex of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs” — that is the critical success factor in development. Understanding that design thinking plays an important role in addressing social concerns and economic development is important.

## **South Africa**

The Republic of South Africa has the most developed economy in Africa and exerts an enormous influence across the southern and eastern regions of the continent. Since the mid-1990's, it has had to come to terms with the reality of the global economy, from which it had previously been excluded. This has presented a unique set of challenges for education.

South Africa benefits from a sophisticated industrial infrastructure which has to be balanced against the widespread poverty found within peri-urban and rural areas. Almost half of South Africa's economically active population could be described as unemployed



**South Africa : Siyazama beadwork and embroidery, Durban**

Figures 1 to 3 (clockwise): **1** Siyazama exhibition installation, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa 2003-4, showing four beaded dolls in conventional Zulu dress by Siyazama craftswomen.

**2** Siyazama artist Lobolile with her work: a beaded doll and beaded textile, 2002.

**3** Four Siyazama dolls display innovations to the conventional costume through the use of white and addition of wings to represent angels who have died of HIV-AIDS; beaded ornaments.

or underemployed, resulting in a burgeoning of informal sector activities, including craft production.

The craft industry has been unequivocally recognized as an important growth area and earmarked by the South African Government for development and support. Within the milieu of the craft sector, two projects – Siyazama and the Phumani Paper – have a dual focus on HIV/AIDS education and economic advancement, specifically in relation to self-empowerment and self-protection.

The Siyazama project, developed and implemented by Kate Wells is located in the Department of Design Studies at the Durban Institute of Technology. It was initiated in 1999, after four years of extensive rural field research in KwaZulu Natal (KZN) as part of a Higher Education Link partnership between the Department of Industry and Trade and Middlesex University in the United Kingdom and was funded initially by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID). This unique intervention promotes the pivotal role of design in affirming indigenous knowledge and creative skills and as a means for disseminating vital information about HIV/Aids amongst rural women, who are the most marginalised and vulnerable of people in South Africa: rural women. (Figures 1 and 2)

The project works with three genres of bead craft: cloth dolls, tableaus and ornaments. More than a hundred female makers, aged from 18 to 63 years, come from the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. At the outset, their knowledge of HIV/Aids was almost non-existent. In this project rural craftswomen, undergraduate and postgraduate DIT design students, health workers, doctors, traditional healers, people living with HIV/AIDS, medical anthropologists, performers, musicians and marketing outlets are working together at multiple levels to increase awareness, and engender a 'breaking the silence', 'straight-talk' approach. (Figure 3)

Social messages, which often take the form of complicated instructions or abstract concepts, are humanised and made more relevant by the arts. It is impossible to change attitudes and behaviours in communities with low rates of literacy simply by issuing instructions or nailing up posters in a village. A range of obstacles – ignorance, fear and superstition among them – need to be sensitively negotiated.

Beadwork and doll making in KwaZulu Natal is rooted in a powerful tradition of recording experience visually, collective memory and social messages. The project has engaged local women in updating 'traditional' styles to develop products that compellingly communicate contemporary concerns and render pictorially their understanding and concerns with regard to HIV/AIDS. (Figure 4)

The economic benefits to these women have been considerable since their crafts are exhibited and sold nationally and internationally in museums, galleries, and craft outlets. But the social impact has been just as important. The beadworkers are looked upon as role models in their own communities and in a good position to disseminate this crucial information back to families and the rural population.

The establishment of partnerships for sustainability is an important component of the Phumani Paper Poverty Relief Programme. The partnerships involve government, industry and educational institutions together with community based ventures and environmental organisations.



4 Siyazama drawing in appliqué and beads to depict domestic strife and HIV-AIDS by 'Beauty'; note the central position of the woman and her white badge which symbolises Aids

Phumani Paper was set up in 1999 as a partnership between the South African Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the former Technikon Witwatersrand, which in 2005 was incorporated into the University of Johannesburg. Based on the performance of the pilot project in KwaZulu Natal initiated in 1999, the Department of Science and Technology provided Poverty Alleviation funding to establish groups to manufacture hand-made paper in seven provinces across South Africa in July 2000. Under the umbrella of Phumani Paper, the twenty-two projects most located in areas of extreme poverty, are at varying stages in their development.

The national office of Phumani Paper, based at the University of Johannesburg and led by Kim Berman, provides support to project units in the form of administration, management, appropriate technology development, training, product development and crucially central coordinated marketing services (regionally and internationally). Post graduate students and community artists based at the University of Johannesburg facilitate the development of technical skills within the project units.

The handmade paper is crafted from locally available natural resources and waste products, such as bi-products from sugar cane harvesting in KwaZulu Natal, agri-waste such as mielie/maize husks) from the Free State, the invasive black wattle tree in the Eastern Cape and banana stem fibre in the Northern Province. Products include custom packaging for the craft, wine, jewellery, art and dried flower industries; gift-wrapping; corporate and

private stationery; as well as material for conferences, conventions, and trade fairs. (Figures 5 and 6)

Phumani Paper is well positioned in terms of local infrastructure and an established regional network of producers. However, the market for hand-made paper products is increasingly crowded and highly competitive. The challenge for the project is to continue to be recognised as unique and to improve the quality of paper and originality of its products in order to increase its market share. The value of the rand and relatively higher labour costs makes South African products expensive in comparison with those produced elsewhere in the region and internationally. African crafts as a whole tend to be more costly than those produced in Asia, Central and South America – making both sales within the region and export to the global market more difficult unless niche markets are identified and exploited. More attention needs to be given to the adaptation of existing products as well as to the creation of new ones, to invigorate trade and develop additional markets.

Pricing poses particular dilemmas. The producers have little idea of the price the market will bear and the cost of labour is not realistically factored in, as this is the one resource they have in abundance. The down-time labour costs, low productivity, high levels of wastage, including reject products and limited capacity for volume production, all impact on product viability.

Isolation is a primary concern since the producer groups are not able to adequately promote their products in their rural locations and rely on the national office both to market them and provide customer feedback. Effective design, product development and production is intrinsically connected to an understanding of client need, competitor products, market trends and opportunities. There is a tendency for the national office to develop and provide the groups with prototypes for contracted orders. This turns the producers into passive recipients of external intervention who cease being participants in the creative process. This strategy disenfranchises producers, perpetuating the belief that national experts hold all the answers.



**South Africa: Phumani Paper Poverty Relief Programme - Papermaking and paper products, Johannesburg**

**5** (Top) Customised Phumani carrier bag by Khomenani producer group, 2005 **6** A box of Phumani hand-made paper for a local ceramic pot, 2005

Both the Phumani Paper and Siyazama projects are over reliant on external interventions to identify and open up new market opportunities and provide incentives to develop new styles. However, their scale and mode of operation differ markedly. In the case of Phumani Paper, a producer's income is subsidized initially with funds received for from the Department of Science and Technology; this unwittingly promotes a situation fraught by financial dependency. In contrast, the income of the Siyazama women is derived from product sales; a regular income is not 'guaranteed'. This establishes greater ownership and entrepreneurship from the outset.

While external expertise, technological aid and financial support provide impetus for establishing projects, more often than not this generates dependency. There is a need to reconsider the role of external agents and determine strategies that enable crafts people to take on leadership roles and the responsibility for transforming their survivalist enterprise into long-term sustainable businesses.

Globalisation and aid fatigue heighten the importance of centrality of building viable partnerships. There is no one-way to do this; Partnerships have to be underpinned by clear, shared understandings of each participant's expectations and acknowledge the importance of 'ownership' and reciprocity.

## Uganda

Uganda does not have a tourist trade as large as that enjoyed by regional competitors like Kenya and South Africa. Kampala, the capital city, offers the greatest opportunities for selling crafts in the various local markets, galleries and craft centres plus the large informal sector which trades along the roadside. (Figure 7)

The number of craft outlets has significantly increased since 2004. A greater variety of items are being stocked that are locally produced and imported from surrounding countries. Their quality is variable and stylistic repetition is common, but there are examples of richly decorative, finely made baskets, mats and innovative products employing traditional bark cloth. Examples of local pottery are more limited; beadwork, carvings and soapstone products are imported from Kenya. (Figure 8)

The most significant outlets are the well-established craft market in the grounds of



### Uganda, informal sector, KAMPALA

**7** Informal sector trading: Nalumenge Women's Group selling their baskets at the National Theatre Crafts Market, Kampala **8** Informal sector innovation: collective embroidery on the theme of HIV-AIDS by Mildmay Centre, Kampala

the National Theatre and relatively new centre 'Exposure Africa' situated on the Buganda Road. Some producers are organised into groups and may rent stalls but the majority are run by traders, who take goods on a sale-or-return basis.

The main challenges of the craft industry are:

- ▶ a lack of funding to support initiatives in the craft sector,
- ▶ insufficient design expertise,
- ▶ inadequate marketing infrastructure,
- ▶ the low purchasing power of the local market, and
- ▶ limited access to tourist and export markets.

### **Makerere University, Kampala**

MTSIFA the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts formerly known as the Makerere School of Fine Arts is the second oldest art school in Africa. Makerere University was established as a college of higher education in 1922 and remodelled in 1939 as a regional institution serving the British East African Territories, known now as Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. An artist and art educator (with degrees from University of London's Slade School of Art and Institute of Education), Mrs Trowell organised art classes at her Kampala home in 1936; by 1939, art had become a minor subject and constituted a major in the secondary certificate course by 1942. In 1949, the University achieved semi-autonomous status and entered into a 'special relationship' with the University of London, gaining the support of the Slade School of Fine Art to establish a Diploma in Fine Art. With the inauguration of the University of East Africa (UEA) in 1963, Makerere University College continued as the regional centre for art training; in 1969 a BA Degree in Fine Arts was introduced alongside the Diploma. In 1970, the UEA split into three national universities. .

In the early 1990s, after two decades of civil war and associated lack of growth, Makerere University began the process of reconstruction and transformation. The School of Fine Art was extended with a Department of Industrial Arts with the objective to promote and encourage the development of small-scale industries. Today, the School offers programmes of study in Fine Art, History of Art and Art Appreciation and the Industrial Arts of Fashion, Textile Design, Graphics, Photography, Illustration, Jewellery and Ceramics. Approximately eighty percent of students currently enrolled within the School are studying one or more of design disciplines offered within the Industrial Arts department.

Makerere University's distinguished history and position within the heart of East Africa offers the potential to provide a regional platform for the development of design education. However, in common with many other art and design training institutions throughout Africa, more concentration is needed to address issues little attention had been given to the such as the relevance of the curriculum to changing conditions and local realities.. Employment opportunities in the formal sector are increasingly unavailable. Staff need to analyse the broader context to enable students to create their own sustainable enterprises. (Figures 9 and 10)

In 1999 the Department of Industrial Arts at Makerere hosted the initial workshop for the UNESCO 'Artists in Development' programme. The intention was to link the application of established and newly acquired skills and technologies to developing and

managing sustainable creative enterprises - focusing on the disciplines of textile and graphic design. The primary aim of the workshop was to strengthen and broaden the application of design skills; not only so as to improve the income potential of participants but also to demonstrate the role of design thinking in shaping culturally specific solutions. Based on the principle of collaboration, South-South (south of the Equator, partnerships between groups of Africans) as well as North-South (partnerships between Africans and Europeans), the workshop enabled 'on-the-ground' African designers and craftspeople to come together within their own continent. Participants from eleven African countries were engaged in a wide range of design practices and levels of operation, including commercial designers, self-employed designers, craftspeople as well as university lecturers.

This workshop was not as an isolated event but was convened as part of a long-term strategy for strengthening the quality of design education, and for encouraging the formation of a regional and international network of partnerships. Building upon the experience gained from the UNESCO programme, the Makerere Art School Department of Industrial Arts forged a partnership with Middlesex University, London, UK through the Higher Education Links scheme; it was administered by the British Council and a subsequent Gender and Development programme funded by DfID. This partnership focuses on curriculum development, collaborative research and outreach programmes in the craft sector.

Survey findings from the ten districts have widened the knowledge base and enriched design teaching within both partner institutions. Specifically this has led to the provision of relevant training for Makerere lecturers and students in partnership with the craft sector. One of the achievements within this collaboration has been the development of internships as an integral component of student degree studies in industrial arts. Internships are incorporated into the programme in years two and three; student attachments range from design companies, community bases and other Non Government Organizations (NGOs), to individual practitioners of fibre crafts, pottery, beadwork and jewellery, metal



**Uganda, Makerere UNIVERSITY, KAMPALA**

**9** Screen-printing fabric at a regional textile workshop at the Art School, Makerere University sponsored by UNESCO, 1999 **10** Close-up of a design created during the Workshop, 1999

fabrication, wood carving, textiles, leather work, and drum making etc. The internship is a mutually beneficial experience, through which students acquire awareness of the wealth of skills located in the crafts sector and contribute their design expertise to facilitate product development. The student reports have collectively informed educational practice in relation to the identified needs of the craft sector. (Figures 11 and 12)

It is evident that producers lack of awareness of the wider context of their endeavours and the regional and global market in which they operate is a crucial issue. The problem is not solely 'knowing where they are going' but 'knowing where they are', knowing themselves and their sociopolitical economy

Information is power and access to information is essential for innovation. In a world dominated by the 'knowledge economy', information technology has become a strategic resource. Increasingly mobile populations, combined with the lack of controllable frontiers for the transfer of capital and knowledge, is profoundly changing the way we live and work with one another. But innovation and development is not solely dependent upon the acquisition of new technology. The capacity to accept and generate new ideas, new approaches to situations, new models and ways of working is the cornerstone of creative practice. The challenge therefore is in realising that power lies not only in technical expertise, but also in capturing local capacities for creative problem solving, to encourage ingenuity and invention.

NGOs, micro-enterprises and formal educational institutions need encouragement to work together in a coordinated, inter-sectoral, integrated way that takes into account the complexity of reality. It is vital that collaborative schemes engage with all sectors of communities to maximise opportunities, capitalize on individual strengths and enable cross-fertilization of technical expertise and ingenuity and creativity in the interpretation of ideas. Successful, sustainable businesses are created and bound together dynamically



11 and 12 Uganda – Art school graduate Ivan Yakuze utilises barkcloth to create gallery art

through the collaboration of talented individuals who are open to change and strongly committed to continuous learning.

The development of individuals as entrepreneurs takes years to put into practice, This process involves supporting them in the setting up, and management of their own enterprises and the national organization of small enterprises . It is better to spend two or three years training and preparing young entrepreneurs and follow them-up for a further year or two until their enterprises are fully established than to start in a hurry and fail. If people do not have a realistic time scale they become frustrated and give up too soon. However, there is a need for both long and short-term plans - short-term activities and goals providing small successes, that build confidence, and incentive to tackle long term plans. Recognition and celebration of achievements, no matter how small, is an essential source of motivation.

Development starts with people and their education, organisation and their tenacity against all the odds. It is about growth, trust, promoting self-confidence and collective understanding so that people can build a future for themselves.

### Further Reading

UNESCO 'Artists in Development' programme (Phase 1 & 11)

[http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=25608&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=-473.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=25608&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=-473.html)

'Siyazama' Rural Crafts and HIV/AIDS Awareness project

<http://www.siyazamaproject.co.za>

Phumani Paper <http://www.phumanipaper.org.za/cms/>

British Council - Higher Education Links Scheme

2003-04 Annual Report HE Links p8 (Design Education and

Sustainable Development Uganda) 2003-04 Annual Report

GAD (p10 Rural crafts and HIV/AIDS awareness, South Africa)

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-higher-education-links.html>

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