

# ***Designing for Social Change:***

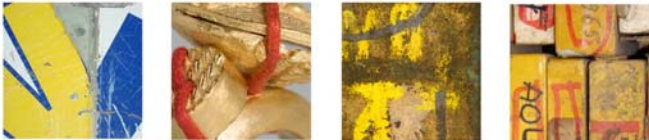
***How Can Collaborations Between Western Designers and African Grassroots Crafts Projects be Most Successful?***

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***Acronyms and Abbreviations***

ADF	African Development Foundation
ANC	African National Congress
ATA	Aid to Artisans
BEE	Black Economic Empowerment
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CCDI	Cape Craft & Design Institute
COFTA	Cooperation for Fair Trade in Africa
EED	Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (Church Development Service)
IPR	Intellectual Property Right
ITC	International Trade Centre
ITDG	Intermediate Technology Development Group
LOSA	London South African project
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PLWHA	People Living with HIV/AIDS
REPA	Rwanda Export Promotion Agency
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
TFSR	Tools for Self Reliance
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
USP	Unique Selling Point
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WIMSA	Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation
ZCC	Zion Christian Church

## **Abstract**

This study aims to advance understanding on collaborations between African grassroots craft development projects and Western designers by analysing past collaborations in order to define common, success indicators. Two such case studies, Gantsi Craft in Botswana and Made in Kenya, were examined to determine the positive and negative impact of collaborations with Western designers and how successful practice could be maximised.

The British Council 2005 exhibition 'My World: New Subjectivity in Design' argues that:

'There has been a resurgence of interest in local craft, particularly in the materials and techniques that define artefacts of a world new to design – like India, Africa and Brazil ... this interest is spurred by a desire to preserve as well as advance craft skills that are at risk of erasure through cultural obsolescence.' (British Council, 2005)

This resurgence can be seen as an antidote to the fast paced, cheap, mass-produced, uninspired goods increasingly available on every homogenised British high street. There are many organisations, such as Aid to Artisans and the UN's International Trade Centre, partnering Western designers with African grassroots crafts projects to capitalise on this resurgence with varied results. Previous studies have identified the criteria of skills exchange, effective communication, product development, capacity building, access to new markets and sustainability as some of the determining factors in success.

Working in collaboration with two African grassroots craft projects, interviewing key stakeholders and analysing supporting secondary literature has assessed whether such collaborations are successful and sustainable. It is anticipated that designers need to approach such collaborations from a holistic standpoint, rather than solely a design perspective, to effect social change in the most successful way.

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the success indicators from two case studies of African grassroots crafts projects working with Western designers. It proposes that collaborations between such projects and Western designers can effect social change at grassroots level. It suggests that one of the most important factors in effective social change is the designer working from a holistic viewpoint, rather than solely a design perspective.

After a short introduction to the role of crafts in developing economies and description of the case studies this paper will look at the positive impact successful craft production evolving from collaboration has on social development in African communities.

## ***The Role of Crafts in Developing Economies***

Handmade craft items have traditionally been an economic staple in rural Africa, particularly as a tool for the economic empowerment of women, and are known to play a rich role in poverty eradication. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD) states that:

The creative industries are among the most dynamic emerging sectors in world trade. Over the period 2000-2005, trade in creative goods and services increased at an unprecedented average of annual rate of 8.7 per cent ... This positive trend occurred in all regions and groups of countries and is expected to continue into the next decade ... arts and crafts is the most important creative industry for export earnings in developing countries.' (UNCTD, 2008).

The debate on the definition of craft has been ongoing for a long time with key thinkers in the area such as Dormer, Greenhalgh, Harrod and Adamson all contributing, but for the purpose of this paper it is viewed as both craft as artefact and craft as process. The following definition sums up the process in the context of this study:

Craft practice demands a unique combination of hand, mind and eye - the technical mastery of material, aesthetic sensibility and design skills. The best involves a fourth element too: passion. (Dr Elizabeth Goring, Curator of Modern Jewellery, National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh)

That passion is essential when working in Africa. Being able to connect with people through the process of craft comes down to a shared passion for the work. As a young, white, European female designer working with African grassroots crafts projects, marginalised in a hierarchical, patriarchal society, I found the most effective way of communicating with grassroots producers was to prove my knowledge of the subject through shared passion and a willingness to pitch in and learn as much as I taught. This is also the essence of collaboration.

With the rise of globalisation and cheap, mass produced goods the market for handmade, high quality, unique crafts has risen. However, empirical evidence, such

as that carried out by Ballance, 2009 shows that the success and sustainability of African grassroots crafts projects has been irregular, limiting their effectiveness.

Nevertheless there are also positive cases such as the work of not-for-profit American organisation Aid to Artisans operating in Central America, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and more recently in Africa, and the Embassy of Finland with their *Indlu Finlandia* development project in Swaziland. Aid to Artisans has seen many successes and proves that Western designers working with grassroots crafts producers can have a positive development impetus if applied effectively.

Preliminary research, both from an initial review of key literature and my own experience has identified two key African case studies that demonstrate success factors (such as appropriate skills exchange) and the pitfalls (such as being unable to take new designs to the market place) when collaborating with Western designers:

1. Made, a privately owned jewellery design and manufacturing business based in Kenya;
2. Gantsi Craft, a non-government organisation (NGO) in Botswana working with the San Bushmen to produce, market and sell craft products.

Made was established in 2005 by a UK based businesswoman and has been successful to date, increasing the number of Kenyan producers it works with and selling their products to a wide and varied market. Starting in a small shack in the Kibera slum area of Nairobi with seven workers, Made now employs 40 craftspeople and outsources work to up to 200 more in the surrounding area. Last year it was producing more than 500 pieces for high street heavyweights Topshop and Sainsbury's and has recently launched a new, high-end collection for luxury brand Nicole Farhi.

Gantsi Craft, a long-established Botswana NGO, has been providing capacity building and training in the area of crafts for the San Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert since 1983. Input from Western designers has been sporadic with varying success. Only a few of the designs developed during several collaborations with Mickael Kra, a French fashion designer, were commercial successes. The mainstay of Gantsi Craft's business is traditional San Bushman craft products, predominantly ostrich eggshell jewellery.

It can be seen that craft production plays a major part in economic development for producers in Africa with Made and Gantsi Craft going some way to making this happen by facilitating collaborations with Western designers. Made has had positive outcomes with such collaborations, whereas Gantsi Craft has had inconsistent results.

### ***Working with Grassroots Crafts Producers in Botswana and Kenya***

Primary empirical evidence was gathered with both Gantsi Craft and Made during 2007-2008. Through the NGO Gantsi Craft, a 3-day jewellery techniques workshop for San Bushmen craft producers was carried out. Gantsi Craft wanted to increase the value of the San Bushman ostrich eggshell jewellery by adding silver, in turn

increasing the income for the San. Utilising a donation of jewellery hand tools, I taught basic jewellery techniques to the San so they could make their own silver beads and jewellery findings to increase the market value of their jewellery. This was a follow-up workshop to a previous one on jewellery design and development. In Kenya I collaborated with local craft producers, through their employers, fair trade jewellery company Made, to produce their Spring/Summer '09 jewellery collection over a 7-day period.

It appears from the literature hitherto analysed, ATA's knowledge, as well as from my own firsthand experience that the following factors are crucial for success for such collaborations;

- Appropriate, effective and sustainable skills transfer;
- Effective communication between the collaborators;
- Monitoring and evaluation of the collaboration;
- Production of designs appropriate for the market;
- A holistic approach to the collaboration, not just a design-focused one.

But how can these factors be achieved? How must collaboration with a Western designer be structured to ensure that a sustainable development approach, coupled with a strong design philosophy, will be reached?

## ***Case Studies***

This study aims to advance understanding on collaborations between African grassroots craft development projects and Western designers by researching past collaborations to define common, success indicators. Two such case studies, Gantsi Craft in Botswana and Made in Kenya, were examined to determine the positive and negative impact of collaborations with Western designers and to identify common, successful practice.

### ***Gantsi Craft***

Gantsi Craft was established in 1983 to enhance the life of the San communities in rural settlements in the Kalahari and around Ghanzi, a small town in Botswana on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. The organisation was the first of its kind in the country. According to Birthe Gjern, the Coordinator, 'An expatriate saw a need for assisting the San (Bushmen) in market [*sic*] their craft they at that time was [*sic*] selling from the roadside in Ghanzi..' (Gjern, 2008)

Gantsi Craft is part of the Kuru Development Trust, which was originally set up in 1986 as a community based organisation (CBO) initiating skills training, language and income-generating projects amongst the San communities. Gantsi Craft:

- Promotes the cultural identity of producers and raises public awareness of San culture through the encouragement of production and marketing.
- Through capacity building, interventions and awareness building, Gantsi Craft seeks to empower San communities to take charge of their own development.
- Presently about 700 producers in the remote settlements are the principal stakeholders of the project. (Kuru Development Trust, 1999).

Today, this figure has risen to 812 registered San craft producers. Gantsi Craft estimate that there is an average of 5 people in each family which means that more than 4,000 people benefit from Gantsi Craft's work. (Gjern, 2008)

The San, also known as Bushmen, Basarwa or Remote Area Dwellers (RADs), are one of the oldest indigenous peoples in the world with a history dating back over 20,000 years. Traditionally the San led a nomadic hunter gatherer lifestyle to survive, but pressure on land for mining companies, farmers, other ethnic groups and conservationists has cut off the San from their traditional lands and most now live in small communities in and around the Kalahari across Southern Africa.

The San are amongst the most impoverished and marginalised groups of Botswana society. Their craft skills, passed down through generations, are:

An integral part of their traditional practices of hunting and gathering, dancing, for healing and entertainment, and personal adornment of the body. While the San continue to use their craft products in daily life, increased production and sale of these items also provide them with a crucial source of cash income. (Botswanacraft Marketing Company, 1999).

The San produce several different types of crafts including those made from leather, wood, ostrich eggshell, seeds and glass beads. The ostrich eggshell jewellery is their most commonly produced craft marketed by Gantsi Craft. Traditionally the eggshells would have been gathered in the bush, or passed on by ostrich farms, but the ostrich farming business in Botswana has collapsed and those sourced from the bush are not sustainable leaving Gantsi Craft to import broken ostrich eggshells donated by ostrich farmers in South Africa.

It is with the ostrich eggshell jewellery that the Church Development Service (an Association of the Protestant Churches in German (EED)) and Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) initiated a collaboration between Gantsi Craft and Mickael Kra, a French fashion designer. In 2002, 2003 and 2004 Kra held workshops with several San artisans from NGOs in Botswana, South African and Namibia, including Gantsi Craft.

Braun, who worked for EED, reports that the San highly appreciated this opportunity for artistic empowerment (Braun, 2006). And Gjern, Gantsi Craft coordinator, agrees that the collaboration with Kra was successful in a personal development perspective insomuch as all involved came home with new energy and new ideas. (Gjern, 2008) Both EED and WIMSA believe that the collaboration provides a lever towards socio-economic advancement for the San (Braun, 2006). Conversely however, Gjern believes that the collaboration did not actually work towards poverty alleviation for the San as the products designed were too upmarket for the Gantsi Craft market. (Gjern, 2008) After the first workshop Gantsi Craft weren't supplied with samples and were unable to sell the new work. The designs were not viable from a business perspective; it took two people two weeks to make one necklace and Gjern reports that 90% of the designs were *haute couture*, which Gantsi Craft will never be able to market and sell.

It is clear that Kra's *haute couture* designs did not contribute to the success of the project. As Whitely states:

Even if the dilemma of design in a Third World country is resolved in favour of socially responsible design, the designer has the difficult task of conceiving products and processes which are not only socially desirable but also culturally appropriate. For a product or process which does not grow out of the habits and customs of a country or region is unlikely to be successfully integrated into the society's culture. Products introduced to aid a group's economic development have sometimes failed completely because they did not take full enough account of the culture factors of tradition and identity. (Whitely, 1993)

Eugenie Drakes, a consultant working with craft producers in Botswana, Swaziland and South Africa, believes that;

The whole Mickael Kra thing [collaboration with Gantsi Craft] is more about Mickael Kra and his ego than it is about a range. And yes, some of the products were very beautiful but it was so far removed from any culture and any tradition ... it wasn't a collaboration ... it's [collaboration] that thing about going in and being inspired by and together find a solution or together design. (Drakes, 2008)

ATA have learnt that, to be successful, 'personal knowledge of market [is] important' (Cockram, 2005) and 'by translating craft traditions and skills into income-generating activities, we [ATA] enable communities to preserve and continue their cultural traditions, improve their standards of living, and send their children to school at the same time.' (Smith, 2002)

Gantsi Craft has had collaborations with other designers in the past, but, as none of the products are still in production, it is concluded that they have not been sustainable.

## ***Made***

Made was founded by Cristina Cisilino in 2005 as a fair trade fashion jewellery company with the aim of promoting a 'trade not aid' ethos. Cisilino brings Western designers to Made's workshop in Nairobi to collaborate with the development team in designing and developing new collections using sustainable and recycled materials, locally sourced from Kenya. As well as employing 40 workers and outsourcing work to others, Made pays above the minimum wage, gives workers a hot meal and pays for their transport costs as well as helping out with healthcare and teaching life skills such as money management and HIV/AIDS education.

Cisilino's philosophy for the Made brand is to ensure that, first and foremost, the jewellery is well designed and made. The fact that it is ethically produced and environmentally sustainable is almost a by-product of the design process. For her, it is imperative she makes the right product at the right price for the right client. (Cisilino, 2008) ATA would agree, stating that making the right product – one that has a market – is a consistent challenge for artisans at the micro-enterprise level. (Smith, 2002) By bringing in experienced designers, Made is ensuring that the artisans make the right product for Made's market in the UK. Each designer contributes their own style and brings new techniques or different skills to the producers in Nairobi. Since the beginning of the project Made craft producers have

been eager to learn and are now familiar with the process that Cisilino has implemented, with all the staff wanting to have a place on the development team to learn new skills.

Pippa Small was one of the first designers to be invited out to Nairobi to design a collection. She believes that Cisilino has a successful business model. (Small, 2008) By bringing out different designers the designs continue to be fresh and interesting and Made employees are constantly learning new skills from different people. Even though this goes against ATA's success factor of the importance of continuity with designers and building established relationships with projects, Made has seen success with this method. However, to a certain extent Made agrees with ATA as established names such as Pippa Small have worked on several collections for Made. If a designer's first collection sells well in the UK they are invited to go back to Nairobi to work on a future ones, with the relationship between designer and producer being strengthened each time.

Made employees and outworkers believe Made has had a positive affect on their lives. Jeffery Kamal, Made's driver reported that he can now 'satisfy my family needs and I'm able to educate my children ... I have no problem with the school fees because I work with Made.' (Kamal, 2008) Aman, Head of Production at Made believes 'you are lucky with Made because my childrens [*sic*] now go to school ... so they [Made] are helping me a lot.' (Aman, 2008)

The UK designers have also had a positive impression on Made's employees and outworkers:

I have gained a lot of experience, because the designers that are coming here they are helping me a lot because I have perceived what they are doing, they have perceived what I am doing so we are helping the community to grow ... its now uplifting me to get more ideas from the designers of England. (Aman, 2009)

Simon Munyua, outsource glass producer for Made, reported that:

Yes, encouragement from those people [designers] that come from Europe, ideas that come from Europe and then you come out of a cocoon, cocoon, is it a cocoon? Then you become a butterfly. (Munyua, 2008)

It can be concluded that Made has had more definable success with collaborations with Western designers than Gantsi Craft, with products successfully selling at market and crafts producers learning new, applicable skills and techniques.

## **Conclusion**

By carrying out a review of secondary literature, working with grassroots crafts producers in Kenya and Botswana and interviewing key stakeholders, common success factors were identified in collaborations between African grassroots crafts projects and Western designers. The success factors and conclusions are outlined in this section.

## ***Success Factors***

Comparing previous research and using primary evidence the following success factors were identified:

1. Design of the right product
2. Appropriate and effective skills transfer
3. Entrepreneurship
4. Realistic expectations
5. Effective communication
6. Multiple markets reducing risk
7. Monitoring and evaluation
8. Sustainability

### **1. Designing the Right Product**

Both case studies proved that designing the right product for the right market is key to economic success. Kra's *haute couture* designs were not a viable, marketable product for Gantsi Craft, whereas jewellery designs for Made by Pippa Small are repeatedly ordered by high street shops Topshop and House of Fraser, proving their success.

David Poston, a jeweller and consultant with many years experience working for ITDG in Africa agrees with this success factor. He believes there are different types of designers working in the developing world context – 'one is the designer for development and the other is the designer for exploitation.' (Poston, 2009) He argues:

Go along and give them [grassroots craft project] a pile of my designs and they make them and then they sell them ... what is actually happening is cheap labour is being exploited, nothing beyond that. If, on the other hand, I work with them to develop their capability as designers, then we're ... enabling them to change with the market because with the first model as soon as I go away they are stuffed because they can't change the range, they can't do anything. (Poston, 2009)

This has also been my experience with NGOs and development agencies working in Botswana. Over the twelve years I was working there, one British development agency is still working with the same projects, sending the same development workers to do the same job, year after year; an unsustainable situation, particularly as skills transfer is the major remit for the organisation.

### **2. Appropriate and Effective Skills Transfer**

As can be seen with Made, although Kra developed new products with Gantsi Craft producers, they were *haute couture* and not appropriate. Perhaps the skills used to make these new products could be adapted for Gantsi Craft, but this would have benefited from Kra's input.

### **3. Entrepreneurship**

Designers should bring their own experiences, not exclusively design, to the collaboration. ATA uses the criteria of designers with an entrepreneurial outlook when seeking key project participants; from master craftsmen who can compete at the top of the market to producers who are best matched to local and regional trends and demands. (Cockram, 2005)

Entrepreneur skills are definitely needed in Africa within the context of crafts. Whilst developing the curriculum for Botswana's first jewellery design and manufacture course in 2009 it has been important to include a unit called 'Business Development in the Jewellery Sector' which encompasses identifying existing and potential jewellery markets, basic money management skills, marketing, pricing systems, quality and customer service. This need was highlighted by key stakeholders in the initial research undertaken for this consultancy in Botswana and is essential if jewellers are to thrive in a country where there is historically no jewellery industry.

### **4. Realistic Expectations**

This paper shows that successfully bringing a produce to market is a strength of private businesses working with grassroots producers as opposed to NGOs or CBOs. As discussed earlier, private business is more successful in dealing with craft production in a financially viable way compared to not-for-profit organisations.

In fact, I found that in my seven days with Made in Nairobi I was trouble shooting processes and techniques as much as designing. I was able to give advice on how to produce items much easier and quicker, improving production. My experience of living and working in Africa enables me to adapt tools, equipment and ideas effectively to the current situation, which assisted Made. For example, the Made producers had been cleaning the oxidised jewellery individually by hand with a pan scourer and lemon juice. Not only is this unpleasant for the producers, but it is unnecessarily time consuming and labour intensive. I was able to source a large electric slow cooker and swimming pool acid to set up an electric pickle pot. The jewellery is placed in the pot and left to soak and only needs to be rinsed afterwards.

I was also able to set up a similar system for Gantsi Craft. On the edge of the Kalahari we were unable to source an electric slow cooker so we used a tea light candle to gently heat the mixture. A heavy duty steel vice from the hardware store was adapted for silver jewellery use with leather pads cut from a discarded Bushman apron and taped to the jaws. This way of adapting and acclimatising to the unfamiliar and, usually, inconvenient realm of working in the developing world is an important one for the Western designer who must be flexible, enterprising and innovative.

It is important that everyone involved in a project has realistic expectations, not just the designer. I was once asked by a CBO to teach a People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) group a two-week workshop on leather making skills for economic empowerment. Leather working was inappropriate and unsustainable as the CBO was expecting me to teach a group of novices a highly skilled craft that they could sell at a reasonable price and of good quality in a short space of time. The provision of expensive, specialist tools needed for leather working was also not considered. Instead we changed the skill to papier-mâché. The medium is very forgiving and

lends itself to a wobbly and slightly crude finish. It needs no previous skill and the group were able to produce brightly coloured, funky animals and bowls that sold well in the tourist market. Better still, they needed little outlay for tools and equipment, most of which was recycled cardboard and newspaper, making it much more sustainable. In fact, the group taught their children how to do it, increasing the knowledge transfer.

## **5. Effective Communication**

Clear communication is vital if designers are able to transfer their skills effectively.

## **6. Multiple Markets Reduce Risk**

Kra's haute couture designs focused on only one market, which wasn't accessible to Gantsi Craft. Made however, produce fashion jewellery designs for both the high street shops and for high-end design house Nicole Farhi. Made are able to tap into different markets to make the most of their products.

## **7. Monitoring and Evaluation**

As a private, fair trade jewellery business working with UK high street shops, Made has to be open and transparent about its operations to its customers. It has therefore been audited by Cooperation for Fair Trade in Africa (COFTA) and Africanow.org who see it as a case study. Gantsi Craft, as an NGO operates in a different way and is answerable to the Kuru Development Trust Board, which is self-governing.

For any collaboration to be truly successful effective monitoring and evaluation must take place in order for the lessons learned, whether positive or negative, to be capitalised on.

## **8. Sustainability**

Papanek argues that 'the job of the designer is to provide choices for people (Papanek, 1995). Poston agrees stating 'it's my job to offer them a menu of information, a menu of solutions.' (Poston, 2009)

From the evidence gathered it is concluded that designers need to approach collaborations with African grassroots crafts projects from a holistic standpoint, rather than solely a design perspective, to effect social change in the most successful way. As Papanek states, any attempt to separate design, to make it a thing-by-itself, works counter to the inherent value of design as the primary, underlying matrix of life. (Papanek, 1984). Aid to Artisans conclude they:

Encourage income-generating activities in a way that addresses poverty alleviation and environmental protection simultaneously; by increasing employment and income opportunities, as well as financial security and independence, and their own entrepreneurial and management capacity; by translating craft traditions and skills into income-generating activities, we

enable communities to preserve and continue their cultural traditions, improve their standards of living, and send their children to school at the same time. (Smith, 2002)

### ***Extending the Depth and Breadth of the Study***

Whilst the initial objective of this study has been met, the area of study is potentially huge, with many craft projects in Africa working towards capacity building, access to new markets, poverty alleviation, sustainability and design development meaning increasing numbers collaborating with Western designers.

This study goes some way towards determining success factors for designers working with such projects; however there is scope for a more detailed research study with a larger group of stakeholders being investigated in more detail with an extended methodology to include quantitative as well as qualitative research. Solely using qualitative data has narrowed the field of research gathered for this study. A wider group of stakeholders will add to the richness of the study as well as giving the opportunity for more negative and positive factors to be examined. In a wider study, other aspects of the case studies should be taken into account such as the different country specific contexts and the differences between the structures of NGOs, foreign development agencies and private companies. The role Western designers play in post-colonial Africa could also be studied in more detail.

As the objective of this study was to advance understanding on collaborations between African grassroots craft development projects and Western designers by researching past collaborations to define common, successful practice it focused on determining the positive aspects of collaborative relationships within the case studies. However, there is scope for research into the negative. The reasons why these projects did not succeed would be worthy of in-depth research.

To conclude, by examining two case studies, Gantsi Craft in Botswana and Made in Kenya, in order to identify common, successful practice when working in collaboration with Western designers this study has contributed to the understanding of such collaborations.

'Exciting things can be achieved by working closely together.' (Minney, People Tree, 2008)

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