

Basket cases: Individual returns from common property resources

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ABSTRACT

What happens when craft items that use common property resources as raw materials, change from domestic items to commercially marketed art products in an area where there are common property resource institutions? Prior to the implementation of the craft programme in Caprivi (Namibia), palm baskets were made by women for winnowing grain and had little commercial value. The craft programme, which is part of the national community based natural resource management programme focuses on product development, marketing and sustainable use of palm and dye raw materials and there is now a thriving craft industry in Caprivi.³

This commercialisation process has generated craft sales income for individual producers and heralded the formation of local, producer cooperatives to handle the demands of commercial production and marketing. Most producers are poor, rural women in remote villages and craft production is a very marginal activity when taking into account the time and effort required. As a result, the craft income is very modest – most producers earn less than US\$50 per year – but still provides a significant contribution to household livelihoods where opportunities for rural women to generate cash are extremely limited.

With palm resources now having a higher value than previously, people's perception of this common property resource has changed. Indigenous common property resource institutions (i.e. traditional authorities) extract a modest fee for use of these plant resources by producer groups in return for protection of the resource from outsiders. Modern common property resources institutions (conservancies) that commonly generate funds collectively for collective benefit (i.e. from trophy hunting and tourism) have questioned the use of common property resources for individual gain by the crafters. Confusion regarding common property theory by some senior government and conservancy members (usually men), has meant that

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producers (usually women) have had to defend their right to retain individual cash income from craft sales against suggestions that the craft sales revenue should be distributed collectively.

Challenges to both common property resource institutions and crafters in this context, is that any funds used for common property management or collective marketing (i.e. commission taking by marketing institutions) increase the marginality of craft as a livelihood activity. In addition, globalisation and the mass production of woven items in Asia, means that handcrafted, traditional baskets made of indigenous and sustainably harvested raw plant materials have to compete with very cheap products on the international market.

Despite these challenges, craft marketing in Caprivi is characterized by a very successful dual existence of collective marketing and resource monitoring together with individual cash benefit, making craft sales an important contributor to the household incomes of the producers. The success of collective marketing is based on strong NGO support driven by donors' agendas for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Conservancy institutions have been beneficial in bringing a strong focus on sustainable use of the raw materials by the producers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Historically, palm baskets were made by rural women for winnowing grain and had little commercial value. The raw materials used for making baskets are all plant based (palm leaves and dye material), all of which appear to be common property resources – there is no record of any individual ownership – with access and use regulated by local traditional authorities.

During the colonial period, ownership and access to many resources – including forests and wildlife – was centralised. Following Independence⁴, ownership of these resources remained with the state, at least in terms of wildlife and forest resources located on communal (state-owned) land.

In 1996, the Namibian government passed legislation that enabled control over the use of (valuable) wildlife resources to be devolved to local level institutions – conservancies – as part of the national CBNRM programme⁵. Conservancies are self-defined common property management and social units. The physical area of conservancies are unfenced multiple use areas that are zoned by members for their livelihood needs – including crop and livestock farming, mixed wildlife and domestic animal grazing and exclusive wildlife and tourism zones. In return for responsible management of wildlife, government gives a conservancy the rights to use its wildlife consumptively or non-consumptively (IRDNC, u.d.). The institutional structure of conservancies varies slightly, but is essentially a democratically elected committee that is responsible for managing wildlife resources and taking advantage of the resultant economic opportunities – usually tourism or trophy hunting.

Forest resources are also able to be devolved to local level institutions, but as yet, this process is not integrated with the CBNRM programme, so regulations regarding the control and use, and institutional issues, are not harmonised (though the two resources are the responsibility of the same government ministry – the Ministry of Environment and Tourism). Forestry legislation allows for the formation of community forests and the opportunity to derive benefits from forest products through sales of permits.

Outside of state protected areas, control over access to, and use of, ‘non-valuable’ plant resources, such as those used in weaving and basket production has remained with the Traditional Authorities. In recent years, the increasingly commercialised production of craft

⁴ Namibia achieved Independence in 1990.

⁵ Namibia’s National CBNRM Programme is a programme implemented jointly by government and non-governmental institutions, communities, community-based organisations and other partners. The programme aims to provide incentives to communities to manage and use wildlife and other natural resources in sustainable and productive ways. This is being achieved through a natural resource management and conservation programme; the devolution of rights over, and responsibility for, wildlife to rural communities; and an empowerment and capacity building programme (NACSO, u.d.).

has increased the value of these palm and dye resources. In response, some Traditional Authorities now extract a fee from local producer groups for their use, in return for the protection of the resources from outsiders.

In implementing the national CBNRM programme, the focus has been almost exclusively on the management and sustainable use of wildlife (i.e. mammal) resources. The craft programme is one of the few elements of the national programme that has moved away from this and focuses on plant resources. Within the craft programme, formal collective action has focused on the establishment and functioning of craft outlets or producer groups; training in product development and improving quality (through workshops); developing marketing systems (including standardised grading and pricing related to type, size and quality of product); and building capacity regarding the sustainable use of raw materials. The craft programme has been less involved in working to develop conservancy institutions than working with groups of (mainly) women ('producer groups') to conduct this training, etc. As a result, the craft programme often works outside conservancy areas, and has not always had much active involvement with these modern common property institutions.

A feature of the Namibian CBNRM programme has been the generation of collective benefits from the use of common property resources (mainly wildlife and scenery), achieved by taking advantage of trophy hunting and tourism enterprise development opportunities. The production and sale of craft is unique, as it is one of the few examples where individual benefits are possible from community based enterprises⁶. However, in non-wildlife sectors, such as inland fisheries management, individual returns from collectively managing a resources is also possible.

This paper explores the shift in craft production from domestic items for subsistence use to commercially marketed art products. Special emphasis is placed on the role of the craft outlets and conservancies as modern day common property resource institutions.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Basketry in Namibia

Almost all of the basketry produced in Namibia is found in Caprivi, Kavango and the four regions of former Ovamboland, and to a lesser extent in the Kunene Region (Terry et al., 1994). These baskets have been traditionally made by women for use in harvesting and

⁶ Others include employment for individuals at community owned campsites. Refer to Murphy and Halstead (2003) for more information.

storing grain, winnowing and collecting and transporting food and possessions. In Caprivi, women make open palm baskets from the young, closed leaves of the indigenous makalani palm (*Hyphaene petersiana*). Once the leaves from the centre of the palm trees have been harvested, they are split and left in the sun to dry. The weaving process can take anything from a few days to a month depending on size, quality and design of the basket being woven. Designs are worked into the coils of the baskets using palm coloured with traditional plant dyes. Dye materials are collected from a wide variety of local, indigenous plants. A common tree used is the *Berchemia discolor* (Bird plum) whose bark produces a brown colour.

2.2 Support for commercialisation

Commercial interest in crafts and their marketing in Caprivi began when the Caprivi Arts Centre opened in the regional centre of Caprivi (Katima Mulilo) in the 1980s. Estimates of the number of baskets makers in Caprivi at that time was 70 (Terry et al., 1994). In the 1990s, the Namibian Art Gallery in Windhoek (the capital of Namibia) and a Windhoek-based non government organisation (NGO) called the Rössing Foundation (RF) worked with the Caprivi Art Centre to provide further support for craft development and purchased craft items for resale in Windhoek. A Caprivi based NGO, Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) concentrated efforts to develop craft in the west of Caprivi in connection with a craft outlet – Mashi Craft Market (MCM). In 1992, the first training by RF of Caprivian basket weavers occurred and RF started buying directly from producers.⁷ RF helped to set up self selected producer groups – groups of women who wanted to earn income from weaving. RF used these producer groups to facilitate training and marketing, and also used local master weavers to train newcomers to improve the quality of production and design. In 1998, the first basket competitions and exhibitions of craft from producers trained by RF staff were held.

With no sales outlet or permanent representation in Caprivi, the craft buying process involved a staff member travelling to Caprivi on quarterly buying trips, and travelling to 16 villages, where women would present their goods for sale. This was a particularly costly method of procurement, and has since been rationalised to buying from only three locations⁸. Producers are paid up front which is very satisfying for them, however, by doing this RF bears the financial risk associated with carrying large stocks. Once the craft has been purchased, it is

⁷ RF buys craft from most regions of Namibia (including 14 conservancies in the north-west and north-east of the country), however, this paper deals only with its activities in the Caprivi Region.

⁸ These are two commercial outlets (Bukalo Open Air Museum and Ngoma Crafts Centre) and a communal building for crafts at Ituse (Masokatwane area).

transported to Windhoek (approximately 1,000km away) and offered for sale at the Mud Hut Trading (MHT) retail outlet. MHT is the trading arm of RF's craft programme and is a member of the International Federation for Alternative Trade. Profits earned by MHT are re-invested in training and development in the craft sector (MHT, 2004).

IRDNC works mainly with crafters from western East Caprivi and West Caprivi and supports the Mashu Craft Market (MCM).⁹ MCM is a producer cooperative with a small retail outlet in Caprivi. In contrast to RF, IRDNC do not buy craft directly but rather provide logistical and technical support to the operations of MCM. MCM is a much more localised production with much smaller procurement costs. It charges a small membership fee, and a 40 per cent commission to ensure that it is able to cover its own operation and maintenance costs. Once membership is paid, crafters can deliver as much craft as they can produce to the market for sale, as long as the items meet quality standards. MCM does not risk buying craft up front and carries a much smaller stock level than RF. Its structure and location are not as conducive to selling large quantities of craft as is MHT, and the quantities of baskets delivered for sale are limited by the difficulties producers have in accessing palm. Producers do not receive payment until their craft is sold and therefore may have to wait for many months.

The logistic and technical support received by MCM from conservancy and IRDNC staff includes management advice and training, product development and quality training, assistance with transport (including that for going to fetch palm and dye materials, getting craft from villages to MCM and returning cash payments to crafters). Although MCM is located in a conservancy and draws members from four conservancy areas, it is an independent organisation, managed executively by the producers, and welcomes membership from as far afield as Zambia.

Though the collective management of producers tends to show itself in the organisation of women for central buying and training – and on a less formal basis women often collect palm together for safety, companionship and sharing of transport costs – even within the Caprivi craft sector, there are a number of different institutional designs. In addition to those described above, there are three other craft retail outlets in Caprivi – the Caprivi Art Centre, the Bukalo Open Air Museum (BOAM) and the Ngoma Craft Centre – each with their own organisational design.

The Caprivi Art Centre, located in Katima Mulilo, is a cooperative that has not received significant support from RF for many years. Payment to crafters is not made until the item

⁹ See Appendix 1 for a history of the establishment of MCM.

has been sold. There have been difficulties with this in the past, as lax administration meant it was difficult to tell if, when and for what amount individual pieces were sold.

The Ngoma Craft Centre is also a cooperative retail outlet, and has received comparatively less NGO support than MCM or some of the individual producer groups. However, this outlet has benefited from the lessons learnt during the formation of MCM, through input from the same NGO staff who help set up MCM. It is located at the border settlement of Ngoma on the Chobe River (the border between Namibia and Botswana).

BOAM is owned by a single entrepreneurial family (who are master wood carvers), who sell craft on behalf of anyone who wishes to sell their goods there and charges a commission.

BOAM is situated just off the main road between Katima Mulilo and Ngoma. Although this is a good location, marketing at BOAM could be improved through better sign-posting.

2.3 Natural resource management

Common property natural resources are often amongst the only resources easily accessible to poor households. Environmental degradation of the natural resource base used by poor households can lead to a downward spiral of poverty. In this context, the sustainable use of the natural resources required for crafting is important to ensure a continuous supply of the material. In a 2002 survey of rural livelihoods in Caprivi, more than one third of households ranked one (or more) natural resource use(s) as either the first or second most important livelihood activity of the household. Of the craft selling households, 75 per cent ranked the activity as one of their top three cash earning activities (Suich, 2003).

Where the craft and CBNRM programmes overlap, a key role played by the conservancies in the context of the resource management required for craft inputs, has been teaching and monitoring the sustainable use of palm and dye plants. Community resource monitors (CRMs) – women resident in conservancy areas who have been selected to promote the participation of women within conservancies – are the facilitators of this training and monitoring.¹⁰

CRMs teach crafters to harvest palm in the least damaging manner, i.e. to use a sharp knife (not an axe), to cut only from the bottom of the new palm frond and to leave some new leaves behind. This technique is very important, as palm populations can be rapidly destroyed by cutting palm hearts (Hines and Cunningham, 1992 and Terry et al., 1994). Weavers have also been taught not to damage plants when harvesting dye material e.g. to cut small strips of bark

¹⁰ Their success in strengthening women's participation in the CBNRM programme has been internationally recognised (Flintan, 2003).

from different places on the tree trunk. The CRMs also conduct some basic (mostly visual) monitoring of these resources, to ensure that sustainable harvesting methods are being used by crafters, and that resource depletion is not occurring.

This training seems to have had a significant positive effect. Though scientific methods of monitoring the resource are not being used at present, palm and dye tree resources appear to be sustaining themselves. Despite the massive increase in harvesting levels (as indicated by the large increase in the number of craft producers, and value of craft sold over the years), there appears not to have been a reduction in the quality or quantity of resources available for use in Caprivi. In contrast, a recent study of a craft programme in Botswana notes that there are significantly fewer palm and dye resources available as compared with 20 years ago. According to this report, 44 per cent of crafters interviewed stated that over harvesting of palm trees was the main cause of this depletion (Mbaiwa, 2003).¹¹

The propagation of palm trees has been attempted, but has met with little success due to lack of attention paid to getting suitable conditions in 'palm gardens' (which have often been located on inappropriate soil).

3 FINDINGS

When reviewing the process of marketing craft within the CBNRM programme, the following were the main features observed.

3.1 Successful but marginal

The commercialisation of craft has been one of the success stories of the Namibian CBNRM programme. Craft sales have been important in increasing the household incomes of producers (mainly rural women); in retaining the cultural value of traditionally made artefacts; in empowering women through increasing crafters' sense of identity; as well as in consolidating the participation of women within the national CBNRM programme (Flintan, 2001; 2003). In addition, it has encouraged the sustainable use of craft material.

The success of the commercialisation process is evidenced by the enormous increase in the number of crafters¹² producing goods for sale within Caprivi – compared with an estimated 70 producers in the 1980s, by the end of 2001, more than 650 individuals in Caprivi sold craft through MCM and/or RF alone (information is not available for the numbers of crafters producing for BOAM or Caprivi Art Centre, and Ngoma was not operational at that time).

¹¹ Other causes mentioned were elephant damage to the trees, lack of rain, and fire (Mbaiwa, 2003).

¹² This includes producers making pottery, wood carvings and any other craft, not just basket producers.

The massive increase in the value of production is also an indication of the success of the programme – in 1998 RF purchasing just \$N1,900 worth of craft in Caprivi; in 2001, RF purchases alone exceeded \$N100,000 (Suich and Murphy, 2002).

One of the reasons that the programme is successful is that weaving can be carried out part-time and fitted around the other household duties of women (usually farming and child rearing). In addition to this, it is one of the few ways in which often poorly educated rural women can earn cash income. Producers tend not to earn sufficient income to enable them to invest in other income generating activities or in assets, but the income earned does tend to be spent on improving the welfare of the household – i.e. income is spent on food purchases and on the education and health care costs of the family. An additional benefit is that most women kept control of their craft earnings and decided alone how the money would be spent. Thus, while craft production does not provide an alternative livelihood, except perhaps for exceptional producers, it does allow for diversification.

The majority of weavers are poor rural women in remote villages – most of the women interviewed for this research were from less secure households as illustrated by a wealth-ranking exercise and their limited livestock holding (Suich and Murphy, 2002:8). Income from craft production is very modest, with most producers earning less than US\$50 per year. However, despite these marginal returns, craft production still provides a significant contribution to household livelihoods in a region where opportunities for rural women to generate cash are extremely limited. Flintan recognised that although the amount generated from women's craft sales in Caprivi was not large, 'for the poorest amongst the community it is certainly very beneficial'(2003:12).

The women interviewed recognise that weaving is a low return and time consuming activity, with one weaver stating that 'the job is big, but the money is small'. Weavers also believe that the grading system is too strict – that they receive lower prices than they 'should' for the finished product. Marketing constraints are also recognised as a problem by the weavers – in that they often make more baskets than they can sell, and very low prices are received if items have deteriorated in quality as a result of prolonged storage. The problems of relying heavily on the NGOs quarterly buying trips (which have since been curtailed due to funding and marketing constraints) were also recognised by those crafters who sell to RF. This is a symptom of the tension NGOs face between the need to 'commercialise' basket procurement business to make it sustainable and the need to retain development objectives.

3.2 Managing common property resources used for craft

With palm now having an indirect financial value¹³, people's perception of this common property resource has changed. As mentioned above, some traditional authorities now extract a modest fee for use of the necessary plant resources from producer groups in return for protection of the resource from outsiders. For example, five producer groups are required to pay N\$50 (about US\$7) each per year to the Chinchimane Khuta (traditional authority) in order to harvest palm in their area. The money is raised through basket sales, with individual contributions from producers depending on their individual sales income. In return, the Khuta ensures that outsiders do not use the local palm source without permission (Suich and Murphy, 2002). The challenge to both common property resource institutions and crafters in this context, is that any funds used for common property management or collective marketing (commission) increase the marginality of craft. In addition, globalisation and the mass production of woven items in the east, means that handcrafted, traditional baskets made of indigenous and sustainably harvested raw plant materials have to compete with very cheap products on the international market.

However it does appear that such common property regimes are managing the resource successfully and sustainably – with no resource collapse evident, despite the massively increased harvest that has been required to produce for this rapidly increasing market.

3.3 Individual benefits from collective action

There has been a misunderstanding amongst stakeholders over the nature of individual benefits accruing to crafters that use common property resources in contrast to most other income generated from community based enterprises in Namibia, which is collectively generated and collectively distributed.

Some people working within the conservancy environment are confused regarding common property resource theory, leading to rigorous debate about what should happen to craft sales income. The need for some regulation of common property resource to reduce the risk of over-exploitation was mixed up with the idea that all revenues generated from common property resources should be shared. This has led to the notion that crafters should hand over their income to be distributed for the common good. This misunderstanding was resolved by explaining some of the principles of management such as differential inputs required differential benefits and by pointing out that the threat of over-use of common property

¹³ Raw palm is not generally traded in Caprivi, but it's value is recognised given the increasing value of the finished products.

resources used to make craft is being addressed by teaching sustainable harvesting techniques.

An important feature of returns to individuals from the utilisation of common property resources is that money is returned directly to the producer. Depending on the use of the money (which we know from craft is used to meet the basic needs of the producers' families), this is likely to have a greater positive livelihood impact than cash that is returned to the community to be used for collective development projects, for example. This is particularly relevant in the Caprivian context where getting direct cash benefits back to individual households within conservancies is difficult as membership is large and the collective revenues that have been generated to date have been modest. Other regions of Namibia where conservancy membership is much smaller and revenues greater, have had more success in sharing collective benefits – for example, Torra Conservancy (located in the arid north west of Namibia) paid out a cash dividend of about US\$60 to its 300 members in 2002. This conservancy earns more than double the amount earned by Caprivian conservancies and has between a fifth and a tenth of the conservancy membership.¹⁴

4 CONCLUSION

The craft programme within Namibia has a number of unique features when compared with the wider CBNRM programme. One of these is that it uses collective management – mainly concerning training, grading and purchasing as well as resource management – but provides financial benefits to individuals utilising natural resources, based on their individual production. The programme is also unique in the Namibian context, in that it is one of the few elements of the national CBNRM programme that does not focus on animal resources. The transition of craft production from domestic to commercial has been relatively successful in the Caprivi region within the last decade. Both producer numbers and the value of production have increased substantially. Given that most producers are women, this has had a significant and positive affect on the wellbeing of producers' households – income earned, though relative low, tends to be spent on meeting basic needs, such as food, education and health of producers families. Though returns may be small, in the context of CBNRM and community wildlife management, small amounts of cash to poor people has been recognised as being of great significance (Roe, 2002).¹⁵

¹⁴ Refer to Mulonga and Murphy (2003) for more information on the experience of conservancy benefit distribution in Namibia.

¹⁵ For example, the average CAMPFIRE household dividend in 1996 was just \$US5 (Roe, 2002:2).

The programme has also had a significant empowerment impact, by increasing the confidence and identity of the women making craft, both individually and collectively. However, the process has not been without its challenges. The marginal nature of craft production is the most obvious, and the most difficult to overcome, and is closely linked to challenges relating to improving marketing for products. If crafters are to continue the commercialisation process, and producer groups and retail cooperatives are to be viable and sustainable, prices to producers need to increase (at least in line with inflation) and new markets need to be found for products. This is likely to involve improving domestic marketing, as well as finding new and larger export markets for Namibian craft.

The success of collective marketing has been based on strong NGO support driven by donors' agendas for poverty alleviation linked with sustainable development. This may raise further challenges in the future if planning regarding enterprise sustainability is not carried out carefully, and reliance on NGOs and donor support may emerge.

Common property resource management institutions – both traditional and modern – have been beneficial in bringing a strong focus on sustainable use of the raw materials by the producers. In this, they appear to have been exceptionally successful in protecting resources from degradation in the face of massively increased harvests.

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APPENDIX I MASHI CRAFT MARKET – A HISTORY¹⁶

Craft making, especially basket weaving, was not commercialised in Caprivi until the early 1990s. Prior to this, women wove baskets within their homestead areas purely for their own use to winnow or to store grain or other foods. In 1990, shortly after Namibia's Independence, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and NGO groups started working with rural communities on issues relating to natural resource management – especially in the context of rights, responsibilities and benefits from tourism and wildlife use. West Caprivi San groups requested staff members of the MET to assist them by selling traditional artefacts at a local ranger station. These sales could be considered to be the start of the commercialisation of craft in the area. A traditional village opened in the area that sold craft items (baskets and jewellery) and local women requested IRDNC staff to assist them in learning weaving skills so they could also sell baskets locally.

In February 1995, a meeting took place that was followed by a workshop where women from a local village (Choi) were taught how to make necklaces and baskets. The training was done with assistance of weavers from Sangwali Village (55km south of Choi and an area with a strong tradition of weaving). IRDNC bought the products from the craft makers and found markets for their resale. This approach was viable at the time, since the amount of craft being produced was small. By mid-1995, craft production had increased and crafters wished to sell their produce from a central location. The large tree on the site where MCM now stands was chosen with the assistance of the community resource monitors. Although this system worked for tourists, it was difficult for the women who had to travel some distance to get there and spend the entire day away from home.

IRDNC subsequently sought funding for the construction of a craft outlet. This was completed in 1996 and a room was provided in the community conservancy office next door as overnight storage. Craft groups elected women to act as sales representatives in the outlet, working on alternate days so as to allow time for domestic duties. A 20 per cent commission was set aside for transport for the sales staff. In 1997, the shelter was upgraded into a lockable market which could accommodate craft on a full-time basis. MCM was officially opened in March 1998 by one of the Directors of IRDNC. With advice from the Rössing Foundation, pricing and management systems were adapted. The craft makers elected a committee to represent the craft groups, two part-time sales representatives were appointed and a constitution drafted.

¹⁶ This section draws heavily on Halstead, 2003.

The quality of weaving has steadily improved over the years and MCM also began to sell to Mud Hut Trading (a member of the International Federation for Alternative Trade), managed by the Rössing Foundation. Despite the lack of tourists caused by political unrest in the area between the end of 1999 and mid-2002, crafters continued to produce and sell their goods via MCM to Mud Hut Trading. During this period, MCM closed. Financially 1999 was MCM's best year, with a total value of sales of about US\$6,000¹⁷. Over the years the number of crafters had increased from five in 1995 to 253 in 1999. In 2002, the security situation improved, tourism revived and MCM reopened its doors for local sales. Between 2002 and 2003, MCM doubled sales from US\$6,000 to US\$12,000.

¹⁷ Approximately US\$1:N\$7.