

A Post-Earthquake Assessment of the Haitian Handicrafts Sector

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I. Executive Summary

In many countries around the world, handicraft production is a major field of employment and in some countries constitutes a significant part of the export economy. Observers of the handicrafts sector predict that the number of small businesses turning to handicraft production will continue to grow. More specifically, artisans have been identified as the second largest sector of rural employment after agriculture in many regions of the world. Handicraft production crosses all of the modern global economy—from pre-industrial to industrial and post-industrial. Artisan production has thrived because handicraft production offers distinct advantages to more formalized businesses: minimal start-up capital, flexible work hours, the ability to work at home, and freedom to manage one's own business. Unlike many other forms of labor, artisan production can also enable a degree of labor autonomy for those who have limited access to the cash economy. As a means of livelihood, handicrafts provide an ideal avenue for creative, independent entrepreneurs. In addition, they offer opportunities for seasonal employment and small production runs, and the sector is often a default occupation for producers who have limited other options for employment.¹

Across Haiti an estimated 400,000 artisans rely on the sale of handicrafts as either a primary or secondary source of income, with roughly one million people directly supported by artisan producers. Like many other artisans around the world, Haitian artisans face numerous barriers to market access, impacting the support provided to their families through the sale of handmade products. These barriers range from management and organizational issues to stagnant product development to insufficient entrepreneurial skills, as well as marketing capacity and limited market access. The world market for handicrafts continues to grow and expand into different niche markets that demand an assortment of unique handmade products, but as other Latin America and Caribbean countries expand markets, Haitian artisans are struggling with poor infrastructure, lack of availability of raw materials and access to sustainable markets.

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In 2005, Haitian exports of all products were estimated at \$391–\$416 million, about 80 percent of which flowed to the United States, Haiti’s largest commercial partner. Estimates for handicraft exports for that year range from less than \$10 million to as much as \$40 million (based on interviews with craft factories and approximations of the combined formal and informal markets). At the sector’s peak between 1980 and 1985, it is estimated that 40–50 containers of handcrafted products were shipped each week. Thousands of artisans were employed, many by factories that had been developing the industry since the 1950s and were able to combine the originality of handmade art with the organization necessary to produce and ship large quantities at competitive prices. These factories invested heavily in product development and trained workers in a broad range of skills and techniques, enabling some to then establish their own independent businesses. By the 1990s, the political situation and an embargo on exports had significantly diminished the viability of most industries in Haiti.¹

Despite the political and economic turmoil of the past 20 years, the Haitian handicraft sector has managed to survive, albeit at a much reduced level than the thriving export economy the country experienced during the 1980’s. Unfortunately, the January 12 earthquake has the potential to act as the tipping point for significant cultural loss, as artisans attempt to find immediate employment outside of the craft sector, in order to provide an income for their families. Even with the major setback of the recent earthquake, Haiti, if properly supported, can build on its reputation as one of the leading handicraft producers in the Caribbean and produce finely developed crafts that use traditional Haitian themes and appeal to the larger home furnishing and gift market in the US.

II. Status Update: Haitian Handicrafts Sector Post-Earthquake

It is now four months since the earthquake and people are struggling to find work and provide for their families as food rations are phased out and the rainy season approaches. Although humanitarian aid is reaching the most vulnerable, the Haitian workforce from all social classes is now struggling to recreate their working lives and provide for their families. With respect to the artisanal sector in Port-au-Prince, there is little doubt that the earthquake struck at the very heart of the industry, with many obvious immediate impacts, but also creating more indirect, medium and long term problems. Port-au-Prince stood as both the center of production and the primary center for export. It was also the heart of the artisanal supply chain, the formal micro-financing center, and the informal loan sector for smaller ateliers. Early assessments indicate not only heavy loss of life but also the destruction of homes and workshops and formal and informal access to credit. This is exacerbated greatly by the immense destruction of downtown Port-au-Prince, which supplied most of the artisans in the country with the primary materials and tools needed to continue production.

The large artisan cooperatives in Croix des Bouquets and Jacmel have resumed production although raw material supply is low. Access to quality raw materials has become more difficult post-earthquake with the availability of metal drums significantly declining due to companies importing goods in plastic drums instead of metal and the growing business of a firm which is shipping metal, including metal drums, back to the US for recycling. Other raw materials such as sequins and beads continue to be expensive and difficult to source post-earthquake. It is estimated that 90 percent of the suppliers for artisanal material were wiped out, specifically the large stores in downtown Port-au-Prince. M.S.C. Trading Company, a very prominent importer of supplies was obliterated. Now, most materials must come from the Dominican Republic, which is difficult, expensive, and out of the reach of most artisans.

¹Global Market Assessment for Handicrafts. United States Agency for International Development, July 2006.

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The most prominent handicraft companies are back to business and fulfilling orders. The port is operational and containers are leaving frequently. Caribbean Craft is currently employing 175 artisans, with hundreds of employees out of work due to limited production space after their warehouse was destroyed. They are continuing to fulfill orders to Anthropologie, Ten Thousand Villages, among others. Ace Metal Works is also operational and is employing 260 artisans in their factory and 150 in the provinces. Their wholesalers in the US, Kalalou and Island Imports International, are committed to sourcing products from Haiti and have placed several orders since the earthquake. Production for the company is still low and access to new markets is a major priority.

The non-profit organization Comité Artisanal Haitien (CAH) has steady post-earthquake sales from the thousands of missionaries who have come to Haiti in response to the earthquake, in addition to their regular Fair Trade markets. Some production has been limited due to the loss of equipment. A stone mine collapsed after the earthquake, which has limited the production of their stone products. CAH is currently employing 200 artisans and would be able to increase production if they had access to a warehouse space to store inventory.

Many individual artisans are now relying almost exclusively on their materials reserves to finish pending projects. In the short term this is terribly problematic and will lead directly to increased unemployment and workshops shutting down once their supplies are diminished. Out of the three major markets in Haiti (Petionville, Jacmel, and Labadee) the most lucrative is Labadee, but access to the 7,000 tourists that disembark 3 to 4 times a week from the cruise ship is strictly limited by a private consortium. Petionville is saturated given the large number of galleries both low and high end and by the street sellers; Jacmel is a weak tourist market, especially compared with Labadee and other Caribbean destinations, and it is unlikely to rebound quickly after the earthquake. The downtown Port-au-Prince market is now nearly non-existent. The destruction of markets in Port-au-Prince has left many rural producers without sustainable market access. For those rural groups who are not connected with the operational craft factories, non-profits and mission-based gift stores, the lack of market access will force many artisans to seek employment outside of the crafts sector.

Hundreds of artisans are unable to work due to loss of production space. While the destruction of markets in Port-au-Prince has left many rural producers without market access.



Post-earthquake employment for women in the handicraft sector is limited due to the fact that formalized businesses in the metal work and papier-mâché value chains are primarily comprised of adult males and teenage male youth who are either children of business owners or need to work to support their families. Many workshops incorporate women by sourcing out work that is produced in the homes. There are a small number of women who work in workshops; however the number of women currently being integrated into formalized sub-sectors is minimal.

III. Constraints within the Post-Earthquake Haitian Handicraft Sector

The challenges within the Haitian handicraft sector pre-earthquake were complex and are now exacerbated by numerous post-earthquake constraints:

- Limited or no access to raw materials
- Limited ability to market products via various marketing vehicles (internet, print, trade shows)
- Infrastructure does not provide secure, sanitary conditions to support visitors or international buyers
- Lack of consistent access to a third party that will represent the artist in various markets
- Limited if any exposure to the latest trends in the global marketplace
- Lack of dedicated facilities to store raw materials and finished products (varied depending on the community)
- Lack of access to product design services and market information for new product development
- Lack of capacity to identify and link with buyers in all market segments
- Lack of access to regular and affordable raw materials
- Lack of access to production financing



IV. Solutions/Opportunities within the Post-Earthquake Haitian Handicraft Sector

The constraints of the Haitian handicrafts sector are many, but the opportunities for engagement and commitment of support are clear and will lead to the overall growth of the sector. There are several overarching goals that have been identified as key targets in rebuilding and reinvigorating the handicrafts sector in Haiti. Goals include:

- Increasing the household incomes of artisans in Haiti
- Facilitating the creation of handicraft micro-enterprises to strengthen supply chains
- Increasing exports of Haitian handicrafts
- Increasing revenue and employment through the support of micro, small and medium enterprises
- Linking initiatives in handicrafts sector with programs in the tourism sector and population resettlement

In order to successfully accomplish sector-level goals and address specific constraints within the handicraft sector, tangible solutions have been identified and include:

- Creation of raw material bank to supply high-quality inputs at a reduced cost
- Connection with US buyers to market products from Haiti as there is continued interest in the country
- Construction of workshops, showrooms and storage space to protect inventory
- Training of sales agents to act as intermediaries and facilitate market connections
- Providing access to product development and updated designs through the creation of an Artisan Design Center
- Providing access to small grants to micro-entrepreneurs through the facilitation of a small grants program
- Conducting business skills training to micro, small and medium enterprises including the marketing and branding of products
- Provision of tools and raw materials to immediately increase production
- Facilitating access to credit
- Creation of a Haitian Brand to promote to external markets with a focus on promoting high end, high value items

V. Market Overview of Haitian Handicrafts

Haiti's handmade sector includes thousands of products made from a diverse selection of raw materials. Popular media in Haitian handicrafts today include:

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| • River stone | • Wrought iron | • Textiles |
| • Baskets/natural fibers | • Papier-mâché | • Horn and bone |
| • Painted calabash | • Metal work | • Beads and sequins |

Despite political upheaval, economic turmoil, and natural disasters, the Haitian handicraft sector has managed to survive and opportunities for growth of the sector exist.



Sheet metal – Perhaps the product most recognizably Haitian, it is also among the country’s newest. Dating back to the 1940s, it originated with Georges Liautaud, who started making cemetery crosses from recycled oil drums cut and decorated with hand tools. Today, sheet metal products range from wall décor and sculptures to paneled room screens, vases, and bowls.

Wrought iron – Using primarily imported rebar sourced from the construction sector, artisans solder and weld together chairs, tables, candle holders, and various decorative items that may then be wrapped in natural materials such as palm leaves. Some are painted; others are varnished or left natural. Although competing more directly than sheet metal products with metalwork from other countries (such as India), Haiti continues to have many opportunities for wrought iron products, often in combination with cut and decorated sheet metal or other locally sourced materials.

Papier mâché – Papier mâché is a popular craft in countries celebrating carnival. The town of Jacmel is particularly well known for its colorful masks, sculptures, and wall pieces—especially animals, real and imagined. Since the late 1970s, Haiti’s papier mâché craft has blossomed into an art form attracting many dealers and collectors.

Beads and sequins – Decorated bottles and Vodou flags are the best-known products made from the beading arts, but other items include alter pieces, dolls, wall hangings, and ornaments. Most of the materials are imported, and many of the designs are considered ethnic or religious in nature.

Natural fibers – The full range of products includes wreaths, birdhouses, baby cradles, saddle bags, ornaments, handbags, and furniture made from local grasses, leaves, sisal, vines, and coconut shells. The raw materials are locally sourced and largely renewable.

River stone – Using simple hand tools, artisans sculpt local stone into a variety of primarily decorative items such as statuettes, garden objects, and paperweights.

Textiles – Embroidery, crochet, and appliqué combine colorful fabrics with skilled needlework to create linens, pillows, dolls, and other textile products.

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