

Chapter 42

Weaving Economic Dignity: A Framework for Re-engineering Value with Botswana's Heritage Basketry Artisans

Keiphe Setlhatlhanyo^{1*}, Pammi Sinha², and Eirini Boukla²

¹University of Botswana, Botswana

²University of Leeds, England, United Kingdom

Abstract

Botswana's celebrated basketry presents a stark paradox, its rich cultural heritage rarely translates into economic dignity for its creators. Master weavers, mainly rural women, have sustained this tradition yet remain in socio-economic hardship, often overshadowed by middlemen. Through fieldwork across three Botswana regions, this chapter examines systemic inequities in existing value chains. It challenges the notion of heritage crafts as mere cultural tokens, arguing for their potential as drivers of national GDP, youth engagement, and sustainable development. This chapter proposes an innovative framework for the socio-economic re-valorisation of indigenous craft economies. Moving beyond market access, it addresses artisan exploitation by integrating four components: 1) Co-designed product innovations respecting heritage while meeting market needs; 2) Fair-trade principles via transparent, community-led governance models empowering artisans; 3) Youth mentorship and digital empowerment for knowledge transfer and market relevance; and 4) Strategic policy recommendations for formal recognition of indigenous craft in national economic planning. This empirically validated approach offers a transferable model for the Global South. By re-engineering Botswana's basketry ecosystem, this research provides a pathway for artisans to become primary beneficiaries of their economic futures, not just cultural custodians. This work contributes to discourse on creative economies and ethical value chains, and to sustainable development at the intersection of innovation and living heritage.

Keywords: *Design Heritage, Creative Economy, Botswana, Value Chain, Indigenous Knowledge*

Introduction

Across the Global South, heritage crafts are often celebrated as emblems of national identity, yet this recognition seldom translates into economic security for the artisans themselves. This chapter addresses this paradox through the specific case of Botswana's basketry, a world-class living heritage sustained predominantly by rural women who remain marginalised within its value chain. While studies note that the handicraft sector is a major employer in many developing nations¹. Botswana is conspicuously absent from such lists, highlighting a critical gap between cultural potential and economic reality.

¹Grobar, Lisa M, "Policies to Promote Employment and Preserve Cultural Heritage in the Handicraft Sector," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25, no 4 (2019): 515–27 doi:10.1080/10286632.2017.1330887.

Situated at the intersection of Botswana's cultural heritage and its economic development aspirations, this research confronts a critical disconnect. It poses the core question: How can a cross-disciplinary framework re-engineer value for heritage basketry artisans in a way that translates into economic dignity and structural change? This chapter's primary contribution is an empirically grounded, practice-oriented framework designed to dismantle these structural inequities. Anchored in theories of the creative economy² and Amartya Sen's concept of *Development as Freedom*³, this research moves beyond academic critique to present a tangible model informed by early signs of implementation and impact.

Botswana Basketry in Context

The basketry of Botswana holds a global reputation for its intricate beauty and exceptional craftsmanship⁴. They are mostly made by women (see Figure 1). Historically, these objects served symbolic and utilitarian roles, from storing grain to celebrating the harvest⁵. The modern craft revival in the 1970s, aided by international volunteers and NGOs, positioned these baskets in luxury global markets⁶. However, this history also reveals a pattern of external dependency and internal neglect. The departure of foreign support has resulted in a downturn, exposing a deficit in local support systems⁷.

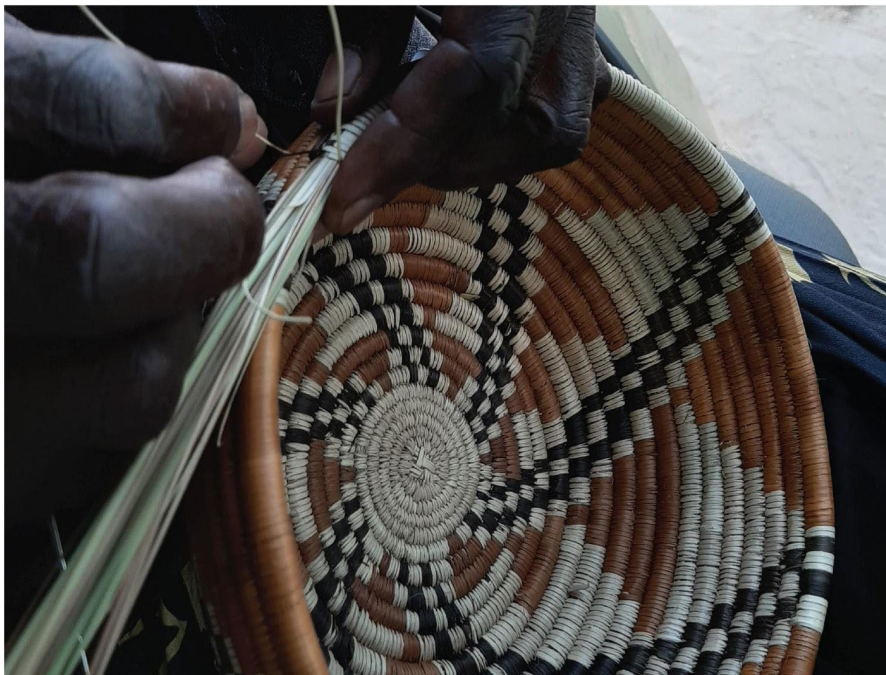


Figure 1: Female artisan weaving a basket in the Okavango Delta region.

²United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Creative Economy Outlook 2022: The Creative Economy for Sustainable Development*. (Geneva: United Nations, 2022), 11, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctsce2022d1_overview_en.pdf.

³Amartya Sen: *Development as Freedom*. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 87

⁴Terry and Cunningham, *African basketry: Grassroots art from Southern Africa*. (Fernwood Press, 2006).

⁵Tlou, T and Campbell, A: *History of Botswana*. (Macmillan Botswana, 1984). 212.

⁶Terry, M. E: *Botswana craft*. (Botswana Craft Marketing Co Gaborone, 1999).

⁷Joseph E Mbaiwa., "The socio-economic and environmental impacts of tourism development on the Okavango Delta, north-western Botswana," *Journal of Arid Environments* 54, no. 2, (2003): 447-467, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jare.2002.1101>.

This was compounded by a policy vacuum. The National Policy on Culture (2001) is over two decades old and lacks implementation, while the nation's key development roadmap, Vision 2036, mentions 'culture' only in passing and 'heritage' not at all. This policy gap stands in stark contrast to other nations such as Thailand, Vietnam, Ethiopia where the craft industry is recognised as a critical economic driver, employing over 10% of the labour force⁸.

This paper argues that this systemic neglect represents a significant missed opportunity for Botswana's socio-economic development.

Research Methodology

The framework proposed in this chapter is grounded in empirical research. The research utilised a qualitative, interpretivist research design⁹ to understand the lived realities of basket weavers. Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and field observations. Through purposive and snowball sampling, 37 basket weavers (aged 35-80+) were recruited from three diverse regions, that is, the North, eastern part of Bobirwa, and Kweneng west (see Figure 2). Twenty-two participants from North region, 10 Bobirwa in the eastern part of Botswana and Kweneng west. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach, moving from codes to themes¹⁰.

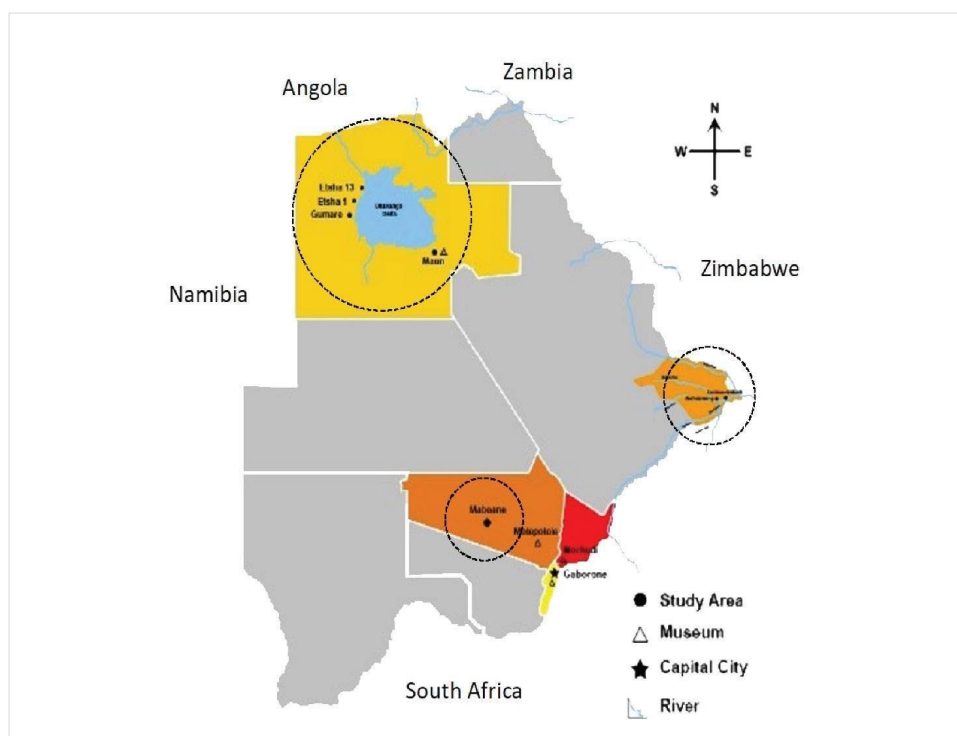


Figure 2: Map of Botswana showing three study areas for this study.

⁸Chudasri, Disaya et al., "Potential areas for design and its implementation to enable the future viability of weaving practices in northern Thailand." *International Journal of Design* 14, no. 1 (2020): 95-111 <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/625669/>.

⁹John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014).

¹⁰Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 no 2 (2006): 77-101 doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Results

The findings from the interviews are structured into four emergent themes that detail the systemic barriers preventing artisans from achieving economic dignity.

Theme 1: Systemic economic disempowerment

A primary finding is that weavers are systematically disconnected from the final market value of their work, trapping them in a cycle of subsistence. One weaver lamented: *"The middleman comes and gives us food for the basket. "We do not know the price in the city" [P1]. "We are weaving for food, not for a future." [P2].* Another described how this dynamic forces them to accept exploitative prices: *"When it is time for the middleman to buy, he will start condemning my product until I give it away for nothing. Because of hunger, I will then settle for anything so that I bring food to the table at home". [P3].*

Theme 2: Erosion of intergenerational knowledge

The research revealed a profound fear among elders that their unique heritage skills are on the verge of disappearing. A participant from Gumare shared, *"Uhhh... I have fear and we are getting old, tomorrow we will be gone. This young generation is not interested in the work we do... our wish is we want the next generation to make it better." [P4].* Makers in Bobirwa stated that *youth often prefer government work programmes*, stating, *"They are saying there is no money in basketry" [P5].*

Theme 3: Isolation and lack of a supportive ecosystem

Artisans typically work in isolation from their homes, lacking the collective bargaining power of a guild. This is exacerbated by the departure of NGOs and international volunteers. A weaver from Etsha 6 described this abandonment: *"As you see us, they have left us... now I just weave from home. It is not nice alone and it brings laziness" [P6].*

Theme 4: Barriers to innovation and professional development

Participants identified significant barriers to their professional growth, including a lack of training and a deep-seated weariness of extractive research. Weavers in the north expressed a profound sense of frustration: *"We are tired and you [the researcher] are our last hope... to remove us from this poverty" [P7].*

The Cross-disciplinary Framework for Re-engineering Value

This was developed as a response to systemic barriers identified in empirical findings. Through thematic synthesis, its four components (see Figure 3) were designed to counteract specific challenges articulated by artisans. The 'fair-trade and community-led governance' component addresses 'systemic economic disempowerment,' while 'youth mentorship and digital empowerment' targets 'intergenerational knowledge' erosion. This framework represents a bottom-up solution emerging from weavers' realities to create an equitable craft ecosystem.

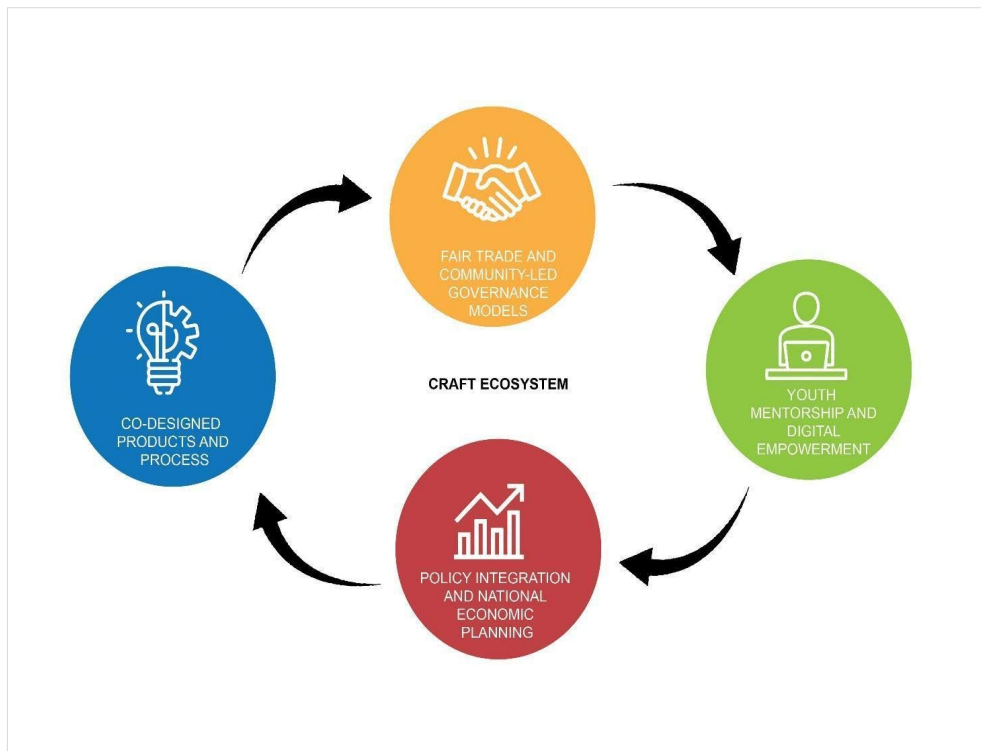


Figure 3: The four-strand framework for re-engineering value.

1. *Co-designed product and process innovations:* Grounded in participatory co-creation, this component focuses on respectfully innovating products to meet contemporary market needs.
2. *Fair-trade and community-led governance models:* To counter exploitation, this component draws on Elinor Ostrom's principles of "commons governance"¹¹ to develop community-led cooperatives that manage pricing and engage directly with buyers¹².
3. *Youth mentorship and digital empowerment:* This component leverages digital tools for intergenerational knowledge transfer and direct-to-consumer sales.
4. *Policy integration and national economic planning:* This component pushes for the formal recognition of heritage crafts within national creative industries policy, anchored in the UNESCO 2005 Convention on cultural diversity.

While proposed for long-term implementation, fieldwork has revealed nascent, artisan-led initiatives that serve as early indicators of impact. Evidence of increased economic returns is emerging; some craftspeople recorded an average 60% increase in products purchased by a corporate sponsor. The most significant outcome, however, is a profound shift in artisan agency. As one weaver stated, "*Before, we were just hands. Now, they listen to our story. I am not just a supplier; I am an expert*" [P8]. This shift reflects the core tenets of Sen's concept of development as the expansion of human capabilities and freedom¹³. There is also evidence of emerging community-led governance and renewed

¹¹Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990. Accessed September 2, 2025.

https://www.actu-environnement.com/media/pdf/ostrom_1990.pdf

¹²Vaibbhavi Pruthviraj Ranavaade, "Sustainable craft design systems for handloom weavers," *Textile* 20, no. 3 (2022): 399-409 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2021.1963623>.

¹³Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 87.

intergenerational knowledge transfer, aligning with global efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage¹⁴. These indicators provide compelling evidence that artisans are ready to become the architects of their own economic futures.

Discussion

The systemic challenges facing Botswana's weavers market disconnection, policy neglect, and the erosion of heritage, are not unique. They reflect a global pattern in which the cultural value of indigenous craft often struggles to find a foothold in the modern economy¹⁵. However, successful craft revitalisation projects from across the Global South provide a powerful roadmap, revealing a set of common principles for success.

An analysis of these international models, such as Thailand's "One Tambon One Product" (OTOP) initiative, Peru's artisan-cooperative-led textile industry, and Ethiopia's fair-trade certified craft sector, reveals three core pillars that underpin their success. First is the establishment of strong, community-led organisational structures, which move artisans from isolated producers to collective economic agents¹⁶. Second is a strategic commitment to design innovation and quality control, ensuring that heritage products remain relevant to contemporary markets¹⁷. Third, and most critically, is the presence of supportive government policies that formally recognise the craft sector as a vital contributor to the national economy and cultural identity.

Building on these common threads, this chapter proposes a framework that re-valorises indigenous knowledge as the guiding intelligence of the ecosystem. By integrating design, fair-trade governance, digital empowerment, and policy advocacy, it presents a holistic, artisan-centred model. It argues that for development to be truly sustainable, it must be centred on enhancing the dignity and agency of the artisans themselves, not just on increasing their income¹⁸. As such, it presents a transferable and ethically grounded model for other nations seeking to transform their living heritage into a vibrant and equitable economic future.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that heritage crafts like Botswana's basketry are not nostalgic souvenirs but powerful engines of potential economic dignity. The framework presented here offers a disruptive yet constructive pathway for artisans to become the architects of their economic futures. To achieve this, we must move beyond isolated interventions and towards the cultivation of place-based creative

¹⁴UNESCO, Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. 2003.1-14. Accessed January 2, 2025

<https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/15164-EN.pdf>.

¹⁵Grobar, "Policies to Promote Employment," 520.

¹⁶Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 1990.

¹⁷Fang-Wu Tung, "An Entrepreneurial Process to Build a Sustainable Business for Indigenous Craft Revitalization," *The Design Journal*, 24, no. 3 (2021): 363–383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2021.1883790>

¹⁸Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 87.

ecologies. This approach acknowledges that empowering artisans is not just about isolated projects, but about fundamentally reconfiguring the power dynamics within the creative process itself¹⁹. Ultimately, this is a call to action for policymakers, researchers, and designers to collaborate on building an ecosystem where the brilliance of Botswana's weavers can finally and truly flourish.

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¹⁹Estelle Berger, "Empowering artisans through design: a case study on the dynamics of collaborative projects, in Boess, S., Cheung, M. and Cain, R. (eds.)," *Synergy - DRS International Conference 2020*, (2020): 11-14, <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2020.113>.

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