

# Filipino handicrafts provide income and protect the forests

**Michelle Arts**

The Philippines has a long and rich tradition of producing handicrafts made from natural materials. Many items now sold as handicrafts have traditionally been an important part of the culture for some communities and tribes. As such, the Philippines is one of the world's major producers of handicrafts. Nevertheless, only two percent of all handicrafts imported by the European Union from developing countries come from the Philippines. This presents an interesting marketing opportunity, and with it, some challenges.

Through the Crafts Programme of the Non-Timber Forest Products Task Force (NTFP-TF), handicrafts from indigenous communities in the Philippines are made available to both the local and global markets. The Task Force is the Philippine partner of the NTFP Exchange Programme for South and Southeast Asia, which is a collaborative network of NGOs and community based organisations. Their shared goal is to empower forest based communities to make use of and manage their forest resources in a sustainable manner. ProFound, a founding member of the NTFP Exchange Programme, is a consultancy organisation that advises exporters in developing countries on product development and marketing for export. Within the Crafts Programme, ProFound facilitates market linkages to the European Union and gives professional support, capacity building, relevant market information, contacts and the facilitation of trainings.

## The Crafts Programme

The Crafts Programme has been running for five years. Its aim is poverty alleviation and sustainable use of non-timber forest resources by providing an income from marketing handmade products. The project also fosters the participation of both men and women. Next to a sustainable income, the communities get training to improve their products and to match them with the demands of the European market. Communities in six of the poorest provinces in the Philippines participate in the project: Oriental Mindoro, Palawan, Negros Occidental, Bukidnon, South Cotabato and Maguindanao. Five of these communities were selected as they were already network partners of the NTFP Task Force. They traditionally produced indigenous crafts, but lacked a link to the market. The sixth group of communities,

from Maguindanao, was chosen because its principles matched the programme's: marketing of products without sacrificing the communities' culture, environment or traditions.

The CustomMade Crafts Center (CMCC) was established as part of this programme to act as an intermediary between the communities and the market. This is a non-profit organisation based in Manila. The CMCC sells the products on the local market, where its brands (such as "CustomMade" and "MODI") are established and known. The products are presented as traditional indigenous Filipino craftsmanship, though combined with a modern design. They can be divided into two groups: homeware and fashion, including jewellery and accessories. Examples of products include lamps, office accessories, postcards, shawls, pillow covers and necklaces. The products are made of natural materials such as grass, abaca (*Musa textilis*), rattan, pandan, vine stems and handmade paper.

## Overcoming difficulties

The communities undergo capacity building in enterprise management given by the NTFP Task Force. The artisans are mainly indigenous people who were already producing handicrafts as part of their livelihood activities. The CMCC decides which of those products are suitable to sell in the local and global markets. They advise what aspects need to be adjusted before commercialising the product, depending on the export market requirements. Whenever there is a need for changes in the existing products or the development of new products, producers are trained and guided by CMCC in the process of product development. In addition, there is a yearly meeting between the CMCC and the communities to develop new collections and product designs.

During the five years that the programme has been running, the communities have experienced several difficulties. In particular, the artisans had problems in meeting the volume that was demanded – and within the allotted deadlines. These problems are being solved by expanding the number of producers and upgrading their equipment and skills, as well as by introducing systems in the CMCC that allow for appropriate time-scales. Systems are also introduced into the communities to ensure smoother operations and production without delays.

## Handicraft production promotes sustainable use of natural resources

One of the participating communities is the T'boli tribe of Lake Sebu, Mindanao. They are known for weaving traditional textiles inspired by women's dreams, called the *T'nalak*. They go into the forests to gather the abaca trunks, from which they extract fibres with a knife. They connect the fibres, which can be two metres long, to make thread. From this thread they weave the fabrics. New designs (like stripes and flowers) and colours have also been introduced.

Now that the artisans have discovered that the abaca plants are a valuable resource for income, they have started to plant abaca themselves. Abaca needs some shade to grow well, so the artisans have planted shading trees as well. Previously, trees were regularly cut to make room for growing rice, but now that abaca plants can be used for crafts, the artisans are keen to invest in biodiversity and use their forests more sustainably. Furthermore, as logging appears to increase the effect of diseases on abaca plants, they are trying to avoid this practice.

Artisans use natural dyes for many products. They ensure that the wood they use for dyeing is waste wood, *buyo-buyo* (a woody plant) or bamboo. *Buyo-buyo* is pruned, and the cutting is controlled in order to ensure the growth of other species in the area. In addition, the weavers have been trained to harvest the bark used for dyeing in a sustainable way, by using the bark from only one side of the tree to prevent it from dying. The artisans also grow new trees that can be used as dyes, and have started a nursery. Finally, a system of wastewater disposal is to be installed in the near future.

The CMCC meets with all the communities regularly, and asks them directly about the sustainable use of the environment. Moreover, CMCC staff visit the communities to monitor the sustainable use of the forests and materials, and prepare an annual "impact monitoring report".



Photo: Mong Tam Le

**Stripping abaca bark for fibres is a traditional skill. Marketing products made from abaca helps communities manage their forest resources in a sustainable manner.**

Furthermore, the artisans experienced difficulties in adjusting their product to the demands of the European market. They had been making their products according to certain methods and using particular designs. They found this difficult to change, especially at first. The artisans could not grasp changes requested by the CMCC and did not even believe they were able to change their product. However, when they were shown new products and techniques during training sessions given by the CMCC, they could see for themselves that it could in fact work. Now, the artisans are continually involved in product development and are becoming more open to new designs and specifications.

The final problem was that the prices of the products were initially too high for the European market, as labour and transportation costs are high. The problem has been tackled by streamlining and upgrading the production process, though this takes time since the artisans need to get used to new ways of producing their crafts. The most effective solution, according to the CMCC, is to target the middle/upper and fair trade markets, where the consumers want to pay a fair price that reflects the labour that was put into the production. However, as the products have not yet reached the European market, there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve success.

### International strategy

Certification, though expensive, could be important to prove that the products are fairly traded and environmentally friendly. However, there is currently no FLO Fairtrade certification for handicrafts and clothing. In order to prove compliance with social issues, there are management systems such as SA8000 and OHSAS 18000, but these do not cover environmental issues. There are however some other fair trade initiatives concerning sustainable production.

Handicrafts made of abaca fibre are especially interesting for the European market. Abaca is still new in this market, few consumers know about it and there are hardly any abaca products for sale there. Abaca is native to the Philippines, which currently has a monopoly on abaca production. In this respect, the use of abaca can convince consumers that the product is special and unique, and reflects the traditions of the Filipino culture.

To enter the European market, CMCC will target two market segments, namely the already mentioned upper/middle segment as well as the market for fairly traded goods. These consumers have more purchasing power and are normally willing to pay the higher price involved in fairly traded and labour intensive products. Also, the number of conventional retailers that sell fair trade products is increasing, which would combine the two market segments. The only problem is that the products are still not of the quality that is expected by the upper/middle market segments. For example, the colours of some products fade when they are exposed to sunlight.

### Benefits and future expectations

The communities are benefiting from having better skills and knowledge about running an enterprise. Furthermore, local sales are growing, and producers are able to deal with the markets directly. The money they earn from selling their crafts is one of their main sources of income. As the CMCC continuously purchases their products, this income is stable. The CMCC indicates which products are needed and how many, and purchases these items when ready. In a sense, it is the CMCC which needs guarantees from the artisans, as trade between the two parties is mainly limited due to production issues.

The CMCC hopes that there will soon be an established market in Europe for some of the communities' products. The communities in turn expect that they will become entrepreneurs with skills and confidence so that they can continue their business even after the project ends. Demand for ethical products is increasing, which offers an opportunity for indigenous products from the Philippines to be sold on the fair trade market. Furthermore, the market for homeware is expected to grow in the coming years. Fairly traded products are increasingly being sold at "regular" shops and stores, making them more available to a variety of consumers.

Currently, the Crafts Programme is still at the stage of adapting the products for the global market. In the coming period, the products will be prepared for the export market, and contacts with importers and outlet stores are already taking place. It is expected that in a couple of years it will be possible to find some products from the MODI brand in Europe. When the project finishes in two and a half years' time, the CMCC will continue to exist as an independent organisation and will hopefully be successful in selling handicrafts sustainably produced by Filipino communities.

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