



# INNOVATION PROJECT REPORT

Consultancy contract (ref: 1405C)

**Project title:** Design Communication: Transfer of Design Principles & Practice

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*Acknowledgments*

The purpose of this document is to provide an assessment of:

- The relevance of the project methodology and activities undertaken to the objectives of project, namely to encourage strengthening and capacity-building of design expertise within the supplier group
- The effectiveness and results achieved in relation to the expected results
- The sustainability of programme results
- The general planning of the programme and efficiency of implementation

This report informs the recommendations for further interventions within the supplier group and the transferability of the pilot model to other groups within Traidcraft's supplier network.

## 1. Introduction

Traidcraft, in common with many other Fair Trade organisations, experiences a number of ongoing issues that are difficult to address with the craft suppliers (producer groups) including problems with quality, products that are not responsive to rapidly-changing market trends / client need, inefficient production processes, and competition from Asian suppliers that are able to produce similar products at a fraction of the cost (in the case of China).

The production and sales of traditional crafts are becoming increasingly marginalised by cheaper mass-produced product. The economies of scale inherent to the industrial sector result in mass production of goods of uniform quality that are marketed at prices that the artisanal product cannot compete with easily. Although there are examples of 'authentic' crafts finding a client market that is willing to pay a viable price, this is chiefly confined to art galleries, museums and the exclusive boutique market. There are few instances where craft enterprises have successfully developed and evolved 'contemporary' products that meet both consumer demand and generate sustainable and viable incomes.

In order to succeed in today's highly competitive market, producers need to be supported to successfully adapt designs, conceiving and evolving new products in response to changing tastes and preferences. The impetus for and ability of Traidcraft's suppliers to initiate new designs and innovate their product range is in large measure dependent upon external intervention by Traidcraft. These interventions may be inevitable but nonetheless provide 'only temporary and transitory support' and there is a need to develop an approach that enables the supplier to take ownership of the process of reinvigorating their product range on a cyclical basis.

The School of Design, Northumbria University was commissioned to work with one of Traidcraft's long-standing suppliers (St. Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra, Ahmedabad) in the provision of training in design innovation, to both consolidate and sustain existing creative practice and to support and facilitate the progressive development of design expertise.

Through an examination of the needs and weaknesses that are evident in the supplier group, the project sought to illuminate the challenges of co-collaboration between designer, supplier and Fair Trade Organisation. The project provided a platform for an analysis of practices needed for successful knowledge transfer and sustainable entrepreneurship at the grass roots and is intended to inform strategies that may be adopted across Traidcraft's network of suppliers.

## 2. Objectives

The over-arching aim of the project was to develop and pilot an enhanced way of communicating with Traidcraft's artisan suppliers to transfer design principles and practice. The objective being to support the development of design skills within an identified supplier group and through the project to pilot a model for developing design expertise, and approaches that might be transferable to other suppliers.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Evaluate existing products, skills and productivity in relation to current market / sales and scope opportunities
- Identify repertoire of existing skills and abilities; establish and prioritize developmental needs
- Improve, innovate and diversify the range of products in response to identified market opportunities, in order to sustain and increase market share.
- Deliver original 'added value' product to the Traidcraft product range which meets market requirements of trend, quality and price
- Develop, transfer and embed sustainable design and product development processes in Traidcraft and their suppliers to enable the business to undertake cyclical product innovation, range development and renewal in future.
- Deliver experiential learning, informed by case studies of comparative projects / enterprise, and model that supports innovative design practice and cyclical range renewal
- Cascade project methodologies and interventions via the production of learning packs, evaluation reports and seminar presentations

### 3. Project Methodology

The initial planning between the partners (Traidcraft / NU) was carried out through email and face-to-face discussion. Traidcraft provided an analysis of their customer profile and particular characteristics of their market that distinguish it from the mainstream commercial marketplace. This provided an understanding of the target market and constraints with regard to a certain element of conservatism in customer preferences and perceptions of 'value for money' in the purchase of a handcrafted product.

Traidcraft identified St. Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra in Ahmedabad, India as an appropriate group within which the project activities would take place. The NU consultant undertook an initial scoping visit to this supplier group in June 2010 to:

- Evaluate existing products, skills and markets
- Identify the types of crafts produced/by volume (capacity) and value (production costs, price point and sales),
- Assess and prioritise learning and business needs
- Frame the staged objectives for the project informed by evaluation of existing skills-base, products and market penetration, identifying opportunities (global, regional and local trends)

Two interventions in the form of co-collaboration between the NU consultant and SMSK's 'designer' were devised and implemented, aimed at delivering **design innovation and product renewal**.

#### **Co-collaboration 1: 'Inspiration, invention and lateral thinking: design methods and creative approaches to product development'** (3 days) December 2010

- Reinforce and enhance existing creative capacity
- Transfer design knowledge, process and creative practices to the supplier enterpriser in order to improve on their products and business competitiveness
- Design / product development /innovation / diversification and range development,

**Co-collaboration 2: 'Design Realisation and Prototyping'** (5 days) February 2011, supported by student collaboration<sup>1</sup>

- Internal leadership, 'local ownership' of design and product development process
- Range development and 'added value', quality enhancement, complementary products and / or alternative markets
- Co-collaboration, communication, consultation, negotiation and inclusion, strategic decision making, risk management

#### **4. St. Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra (SMSK)**

St. Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra in the Gomtipur district of Ahmedabad in North-west India was founded by a group of Dominican nuns in 1970. With the support of an initial grant from OXFAM it was set up to provide stitching classes to women from the surrounding slums, and went on to establish itself as a sewing and embroidery centre. The centre employs indigenous craftsmanship to create the distinctive Gujarati style of embroidery featuring mirror-work and embroidered motifs of birds, elephants, flowers and foliage. Using locally produced thread and hand-loom cotton the centre makes products ranging from bags, cushions, tablecloths, bedspreads and hangings to Christmas decorations and to a lesser extent simple items of clothing.

SMSK supports the livelihoods of approximately 475 women, the majority working in their homes to produce the embroideries on the cloth. A core group of workers are employed full-time at the centre, undertaking stamping designs, sampling, washing and ironing the embroideries, storekeeping, product manufacture & finishing and packaging for delivery. The women outworkers come to the centre twice a week to pick up supplies and working from home enables them to take care of their household duties and children and earn a living – nearly 40% of the women are the major wage earners for their families.

SMSK aims to provide employment at just wages to these women and Traidcraft has a longstanding and valued relationship with SMSK that stretches back over thirty years.

##### **4.1 The Existing Position**

SMSK is heavily dependent on export orders, which constitutes 95% of its' business. The major markets for SMSK's products are in North America (Ten Thousand Villages USA & Canada) and Italy (CTM Altromercato), but orders placed by Traidcraft in 2009-11 accounted for 11% of SMSK turnover.

Sales within the Indian market are more limited. Although sales to Fabindia represented 5% of turnover in 2009-10, the products are branded with the Fabindia label and the consumer would be unaware that the embroidered garments were produced by SMSK.

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<sup>1</sup> 2nd Year Fashion students were offered the opportunity to collaborate in the development of design concepts appropriate to Traidcraft's customer profile, utilising the technical / creative skills and materials available within the supplier enterprise in response to identified market opportunities.

## SMSK EXPORTS OF THE YEAR 2009-10

Trade organisation	AMT. \$	% Sales
TEN THOUSAND VILLAGES USA	\$43,080.23	18%
CTM ALTROMERCATO ITALY	\$37,573.00	15%
TEN THOUSAND VILLAGES CANADA	\$35,120.65	14%
<b>TRAIDCRAFT U.K.</b>	<b>\$25,258.41</b>	<b>11%</b>
OXFAM, AUSTRALIA	\$22,615.83	10%
SERRV, USA	\$17,344.25	8%
FINLAND	\$15,493.64	6%
PRESS ALTERNATIVE	\$13,620.29	5%
ONE VILLAGE, U.K.	\$11,862.98	5%
TRADEAID NEW ZEALAND	\$6,830.20	3%
INTERNATIONAL LIVING JAPAN	\$281.21	0%
<b>FABINDIA, INDIA</b>	<b>\$12,464.00</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Total sales (gross)</b>	<b>\$241,544.69</b>	

Table 1. Gross sales figures SMSK, 2009-10

### 4.2 Inhibitors to business growth

*Wholesale pricing:* St Mary's does not appear to suffer from a lack of business throughput and has an order book that keeps the workers fully occupied. But given the numbers of women supported by the centre the sales figures paint a less favourable picture. SMSK's margin (as calculated in rupees) has not altered in recent years and has been progressively squeezed due to the pressures of inflation, rising cost of materials and the fluctuating fortunes of the \$, £ & Euro exchange rates - effectively reducing the purchasing power / value of income generated by the business.

*Cultural context:* The socio-cultural context of the women's lives impacts on the ability of SMSK to effectively plan and maintain efficient production. Family commitments and social obligations such as those arising during the wedding season, festivals, bereavements and health issues make it difficult to predict work patterns from month to month. These issues are not unusual in a sector where work is carried out in the home and earning a livelihood is woven into and often competes with family duties and concerns. Whilst SMSK is sensitive to the women's circumstances, managing production levels and meeting order times can present difficulties. Sustaining a business model that integrates and acknowledges the women's social obligations requires flexibility from both the supplier and the receiving organisation.

*Market awareness:* SMSK plays little or no part in the physical presentation / display and marketing of their works, thus gaining no direct feedback from the end consumer. The centre's location coupled with limited resources inhibits SMSK from marketing their own products. They have no exposure in the local marketplace but have not explored the potential for promoting and piloting products in up-market hotels and outlets in Ahmedabad.

#### 4.3 Training needs

During the course of the scoping visit, an extensive array of products was displayed, which demonstrated the considerable skills of the women. SMSK has established a reputation for the superiority of its' embroidery, underpinned by the strict application of quality control resulting in consistently high standard of its products. However, many of the designs have changed little over the years, design styles and colour combinations that have moved on from tradition but no longer surprise the market. The woman are comfortable with stitches they know and familiar patterns and a certain level of resistance to change is inevitable but a lack design and product innovation expertise places SMSK at a disadvantage in the volatile conditions of today's globalised market. The consumer is spoilt for choice and constantly seeking fresh ideas and distinctive designs that combine fine craftsmanship and originality. SMSK needs to nurture and develop in-house design expertise to strengthen its capacity to respond to trends and buyer / consumer preferences and innovate to both stay ahead of the competition and move its products up the 'value-chain'.

In order to reinforce and enhance existing creative capacity of SMSK within the time constraints of the project three key objectives were identified:

- **Understanding of design principles and processes** – developing the ability to generate and produce specific designs independently.
- **Product development and innovation** (utilizing materials readily available within the production centre) - to successfully adapt designs, conceiving and evolving new products in response to changing tastes and preferences. This may be an adaptation / enhancement of an existing product, a combination of designs, or a new idea generated by varying the base fabric and / or development of new motifs / shapes / products.
- **Product identity** - Brand identity, USP and 'added-value' – the cultural narrative behind the product may be an equal selling point

### 5. Project implementation

A twin–approach was adopted in the implementation of the project. Firstly to provide SMSK with a 'quick win' in the delivery of fresh design ideas through the production of product ideas / samples with the involvement of BA Hons Fashion students and secondly, to co-collaborate with the in-house 'designer' at SMSK to facilitate local ownership in the generation of design concepts for the home-ware market.

The training on the ground at the supplier group was initially planned as a series of two workshops with a core group of participants. However, it became apparent during the scoping visit that SMSK did not have an organisational model that would enable the release of several members of the core group of women to attend a formal workshop. There is a clear demarcation of roles between Mr Vijay, who is the only member of the workforce that is engaged in drafting designs and the core group of women who produce the sample embroideries / products. There



was no plan to alter this division of labour, to identify and develop incipient design skills in other core workers to create a wider team of 'designers'. Thus the interventions focused on developing the design skills of Vijay, in-house self taught 'designer', facilitating his understanding of design methods as a means to evolve, innovate and enhance the product range, creating new styles and 'added value' without losing the key characteristics of fine embroidery skills and attention to quality control reflected in SMSK's products.

## 5.1 Activity Plan

Date	Activity
April 2010	<b>Initial planning between the partners</b> (Traidcraft / NU) conducted via email and face-to-face discussions to prioritise business needs and agree framework of activities
June 2010	<b>Situation Analysis of the Supplier Enterprise</b>
Sept 30/31 – end of Nov 2010	<b>Incorporation of the Traidcraft brief into the Fashion Design / Craftsmanship project</b> Undertaken by 2 <sup>nd</sup> year Fashion students in semester 1 Final year students were also offered the opportunity to work on developing design concepts for Traidcraft.
Sept 30/31	<b>Traidcraft Presentation</b> At the outset of the project there was presentation to introduce the students to both Traidcraft ('the brand' – types of markets and consumer profiles /preferences) and the work produced by St Mary's (product types, cloths, pattern and embellishments that St Mary's employs and /or have access to).  Students could choose to work on design concepts for either garment (construction and shape and placement of embellishment) or accessories (product types / function, design composition, stitch techniques /details).
Oct 010	Design development (Student project)
w/c Oct 25	Interim critique / product concepts / design selection (Student project) Traidcraft participation in the selection process
Nov 2010	Manufacture of sample / design prototype (Student project)
	Presentation of finalised design and samples. Selection by Traidcraft for trial sample to be produced by St Mary's
Dec 2010 <i>Ahmedabad</i>	<b>Co-collaboration 1 'Inspiration, invention and lateral thinking: design methods and creative approaches to product development'</b> targeting in-house designer at SMSK  - Transfer of design principles and practice - Development of design concepts through the adaption of existing products,

	exploring colour, varying of motif, and placement / spatial relationship of design elements
Feb 2011 <i>Ahmedabad</i>	<p><b>Co-collaboration 2 ‘Design Realisation and Prototyping’</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Production of sample cushion covers from designs emerging from the first intervention</li> <li>- Development of complementary design for wall hanging</li> </ul> <p><b>Trial sample manufacture of garment &amp; accessory designs</b> (student project). Two final year BA Hons Fashion student accompanied the NU consultant to work in partnership with SMSK in the sample manufacture of their designs for ladies’ jackets and accessories (tote bags / clutch bag).</p>
March 2011	Debrief at Traidcraft to reflect upon the outcomes of and lessons learnt at the workshop and sampling activity undertaken at St Mary’s.

## 5.2 Activities undertaken at SMSK

### Co-collaboration 1 (December 2010)

In discussion with Traidcraft, it was determined that the design training should concentrate on exploring motifs and fabric qualities without a specific product in mind. Within the circumstances on the ground in Ahmedabad, it swiftly became clear that this approach would need to be rethought.

Firstly, Vijay could not grasp the concept of working without the parameters provided by the shape, size and purpose being defined. It proved to be far more productive to look to the current range of products to consider ways in which these could be adapted to diversify, complement or generate new product that would display the exquisite skills of the embroiderers but create a new feel to the product.

We had the opportunity on the first day to visit the National Institute of Design (NID), where we were able to view the contemporary bespoke products generated by graduates of the Institute, which are sold through a shop located within the campus<sup>2</sup>. The use of scale in some of the cushion designs drew attention to these products and I suggested that we look at SMSK’s selection of cushion covers with a view to exploring the difference that scaling up motifs and / or sections of existing pattern makes to the design impact of a product.

We looked at a number of their existing designs and agreed that we would play with ‘Banyan Tree & Birds’ cushion, enlarging sections and elements of the ‘tree’ to fill the whole cushion and adopt a more neutral colour palette. These steps generated new designs that had quite a different character from the original cushion and Vijay was able to see and understand how by simply changing scale and colour you could reinvent the product range.

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<sup>2</sup> There was also an exhibition of prizewinning craft / textiles in the Institute’s gallery, demonstrating the imaginative ways in which a number of the artisans had combined both craftsmanship and design to produce unique garments and stunning home-ware products.

In relation to experimenting with fabric qualities, the Sisters and I investigated locally available cottons but amongst the cloths on sale at their local fabric suppliers there was little choice and nothing that we felt to be at all suitable except for Khadi. Khadi fabric is increasingly expensive, more highly priced than the handloom cotton SMSK employs, and proved to be less stable as a ground for embroidery. So with regard to the key issues of price-point and functionality it is less fit for purpose than the handloom. If SMSK were to explore a variety of fabric weights consideration needs to be given to not only how the fabric handles stitch-work but also what additional training the seamstresses might need.

### **Co-collaboration 2 (February 2011)**

During the course of the second visit, the design concepts and swatch produced in December were further worked-up and completed as sample – adding piping to the cushions completed the product renewal and once again Vijay could see how a simple addition introduced a new look to the finish of the product. Design is not necessarily about major changes; even small shifts can make the difference between a product that catches the eye and one that fades into the general milieu of products

Taking the new cushion designs and manipulating scale as the starting point, we then worked on combining and reorganising these designs to generate a singular wall hanging – replacing the birds with butterflies (as requested by Traidcraft). It was evident during this process that Vijay is very adept as a draughtsman and has a feel for line and rhythm in design but when confronted with introducing a new motif (the butterfly) he showed less judgment. In combining design elements the outline shapes and style of motifs needed to complement and play off each other but – to use Sr. Lucia's words Vijay's butterflies 'look like an invasion of a squadron of mosquitoes' which somewhat jarred within the curves of the leafy banyan tree. Nonetheless, the design concept and visual structure for the hanging was a good response to the design brief and a little additional work (post-visit) resolved the 'butterfly' issue.

### **Trial sample manufacture of garment & accessory designs (student project).**

The Traidcraft brief for the development of designs for garments and fashion accessories was offered as one of the options within the 2<sup>nd</sup> year Fashion project focused on the theme of Craftsmanship and interested final year students were also invited to participate.

At the outset of the project, Hilary Anderson from Traidcraft gave a presentation to the cohort of students – setting the brief in the context in order to facilitate the student's understanding of Traidcraft's customer profile and the nature of the products, skills and working environment of SMSK.

A group of eight students opted to undertake the Traidcraft brief, producing initial ideas and design concepts for presentation and selection by Traidcraft. After the initial design conceptualisation phase, two students, Julia specialising in textiles and the Lauren specialising in womenswear, were selected and encouraged to combine their ideas and skills to collaborate in the further development and refinement of designs for jackets and bags. They were supported and guided throughout the project by both their fashion tutors and Morin Douglas.

A further critique and product selection took place in December and the final patterns and specifications were produced together with decisions regarding placement and styles of embroidery taken in preparation for the students' visit to St Mary's

During the course of the visit the students took responsibility for overseeing the sample production of the two jacket designs, tote bags and a clutch bag – all of which were discreetly embellished with a more refined and stylish embroidery look. The products aimed to be equally attractive to Traidcraft's traditional customer base and to a younger market, seeking to maintain customer loyalty and generate sales amongst a new generation of consumers seeking to support craftsmanship, fair trade and be fashionable.

There was perhaps less of a collaboration between Vijay and the students, the amount of work to be completed within the week necessitated the students adopting more of a supervisory / directing role. In order to complete the sampling within the time available, they worked through Vijay, who translated instructions to the externally contracted tailor and directions given to the embroiderers and seamstresses. SMSK does not have an in-house tailor with pattern cutting skills, which creates a reliance on outsourcing. Although the tailor was quite capable, there was room for improvement with regard to reliability in terms of fully understanding and following instructions. The erratic timekeeping of the tailor also slowed down the sampling process and as he worked out of his own premises, avoidable mistakes and / or necessary adjustments that would have been picked up through supervision could not be addressed during the course of the manufacturing process. If SMSK were to grow the garment side of the business there would be a need to consider employing a tailor on-site at the centre but presently the sales generated from garments does not justify such an investment.

The students bonded with Vijay and the women and each task was undertaken with enthusiasm and diligence – and the students were stunned by skills and speed of the women in their work. Gaining an understanding of all of the stages of production and taking responsibility for overseeing the sampling was an invaluable learning experience for the students. By the end of the week, together with the women they had produced the jackets, bags and embroidery samples and all of this was accomplished in parallel with the centre continuing to work on current orders – a hive of activity.

### 5.3 Participation from the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad

Based on the idea of creating “tandems” between host local institutions and international ones, textile students from the National Institute of Design (NID) were invited to participate in the project. Fourteen students and their tutor attended the first intervention in December. This was the first time that any of them had visited SMSK. This provided the opportunity for the students' to familiarize themselves with the production processes, develop motifs for embroidery facilitated by the NU consultant and working together with and guided by the women to learn basic stitches and embroidery skills.

It was hoped that this might lead to the ongoing involvement at SMSK of one or two NID students, providing mutual benefit and a presence on the ground between interventions, promoting the possibility of forging lasting local relationships. The workload pressures of their studies at NID did not allow for further student involvement but a member of the faculty, Pavitra Shyam attended both interventions and stated her intention to maintain contact with St Mary's on an informal basis.

The NID has played and continues to play a prominent in documenting the craft heritage and contemporary situation of the artisans across India but its' resources are severely stretched. It is

unlikely to be in a position to dedicate sufficient time to provide long-term support to any single enterprise.

## 6. Recommendations

**Embedding design innovation:** Development of design expertise is an iterative process requiring the gradual withdrawal of support mechanisms until such time as entrepreneurial expertise is fully embedded and the supplier group is able to fully own the process of designing and evolving new product ranges.

The project injected fresh product ideas and approaches to reinventing the product offering but if the supplier group is to move towards being a design-led business the model of co-collaboration for strategic design innovation and market understanding needs to be built upon through developing strategic partnerships with appropriate local / regional Design Institutions to provide follow-up support to the supplier group.

It would be advantageous for additional members of the workforce to undertake design training embracing not only drawing skills and design processes but also to develop CAD skills. This would need to be handled sensitively lest Vijay feel that his current position of authority be undermined but as part of the business development strategy it is important that a knowledge and understanding of the value of design innovation is more widely held within the organisation.

**Market opportunities and diversification:** there are benefits to be derived from identifying opportunities to promote and pilot products in the local / regional markets. However, the acquisition of marketing, branding and product presentation skills to support the exploitation of local / regional opportunities would be important to successfully competing within this market.

**Added Value and Product Identity:** The ability to offer authentic and creative cultural products, which are packaged and presented to the consumer ways that tell a story, promoting the cultural narrative and uniqueness of the product, is clearly advantageous in moving the products up the value chain.

**Succession planning:** The supplier needs to develop a succession plan to ensure continuity in the provision of organizational, production planning & quality control and design expertise to sustain the business in the long-term. The imminent retirement of Sr. Lucia will leave a knowledge gap that needs to be addressed.

### 6.1 Transferability

The situation analysis would be a key component to inform the ways in which the model may need to be customised to take account of:

- the cultural context
- business situation of the supplier group
- level of skills and specialist expertise / material requirements
- products, price point and productivity
- current market, turnover and trends
- any special needs / circumstances that need to be considered

## **Acknowledgments:**

I should like to express my sincere gratitude to Sr. Lucia and Sr. Silvia and all the women at St Mary's for all the hospitality, kindnesses and support that they extended throughout each visit; their generosity of spirit was truly inspirational. I would also like to thank Traidcraft for their active engagement not only in the planning and preparation but also for the support that they provided to the students throughout the delivery of the project. I make a special mention of the role played by Monica Philbrook in the conception of the project, Catherine Howe, Hilary Anderson and Morin Douglas - their guidance and insights ensured that the project was productive and of benefit to all the participants.

I thank colleagues from the Fashion department within the School of Design, who ably supported the needs of the student project work.

I also wish to applaud the endeavours of two students – Julia Price and Lauren Wroe – their design expertise, professionalism and commitment made a crucial contribution to the outputs achieved in partnership with the women at St Mary's.