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Crafts: Artisans turn their hands to entrepreneurship

By Sarah Murray

When undertaking an internship with a craft development project for Mayan women weavers in Chiapas, Mexico, participants are not only acquiring weaving skills. Treated as young entrepreneurs, they must specify career choices – from production supervision and retail management to international marketing – and their curriculum is structured accordingly.

The Mexican weaving internship – part of a project funded by the Kellogg Foundation – is run by Aid to Artisans, a US-based charity that recently merged with Creative Learning, an economic and social development non-profit group.

Since it was founded, Aid to Artisans has helped craftspeople around the world to raise their standards and designs to meet the demands of western consumers and to improve their sales and marketing techniques.

“Young people need access to market-driven product development, business training and linkage to markets,” says Monika Steinberger, director of programme management and development.

These kinds of skills enable young artisans to move away from producing charming but poor-quality trinkets to creating high-quality items that could be sold in shops in New York or London.

This is essential, say those who see artisan industries as a means of providing employment in developing countries. In remote rural communities that lack employment opportunities for young people, craft production – aside from agriculture – may be the only income option for adolescents.

For young people in developing countries, craft production has the advantage of generating immediate income that requires existing skills and a relatively low financial investment.

Yet, to increase their income, young people need to be equipped with more than craft-making

skills. “In the developing world, there are many younger people being trained as artisans,” says Connie Duckworth, a former Goldman Sachs banker who founded Arzu Rugs to create work for women weavers in Afghanistan. “The missing link continues to be people who are trained in business skills.”

Giving craftspeople access to markets is another part of the mission of Arzu Rugs. Arzu is now a boutique retail business selling high-quality, hand-spun wool rugs made by Afghan women to global clients. The rugs come in contemporary designs created by artists such as Thomas Schoos, the interior designer, and Zaha Hadid, the prizewinning architect.

Ms Duckworth believes that if young people are to make the most of craft production they have to be helped to develop these kinds of products.

This, she says, often means providing access to traditional materials. In the case of rugs, these would be natural wool dyes, rather than the cheaper acrylic versions that are starting to be used in many places.

Equally important is raising awareness among craft producers of the value of these materials. “They’re thinking that modern materials are what people want, but in reality people want authenticity,” says Ms Duckworth.

Training in what appeals to affluent buyers is part of equipping young artisans for greater business success. “An artisan in a small village can’t understand what is relevant or saleable in the marketplace,” she says. “You need to develop the kind of skills that create this linkage to market and then work in the field, helping them develop the right kinds of supply chains and entry to markets.”

Bringing a business approach to craft production can shift artisans’ perceptions about the nature of industry, from one involving low-paid craft-based work to one that offers an entrepreneurial career with promising prospects.

The advantage of this approach young people can use craft production to learn the kinds of skills that they can apply in other industries or careers. “To make craft relevant to youth as a career choice, any training should stress entrepreneurial and business skills that will not only be relevant for the professional practice of handicraft but also for other lines of work,” says Ms Steinberger.

Tal Dehtiar, founder of Oliberté, agrees. He established his social enterprise – which arranges partnerships with factories, suppliers, farmers and workers in Africa – to create jobs for young people producing expensive footwear for western markets.

Mr Oliberté has 57 workers, 60 per cent of whom are women and 80 per cent of whom are

between the ages of 18 and 30. One of his aims is to do more than provide young people with technical skills. He wants to equip his employees with what they need to move on to other careers.

“We help to develop them in the company and at some point, when they reach their potential with us, we say fly away,” he says. “So we’re providing not only monetary or technical skills,” he says. “But also the idea of hope and belief in themselves.”

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