A Search for Sustainable Livelihoods Within Global Marketplaces: Stories of Learning and Change Among Rural Artisans in Thailand.

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Abstract: Community-based artisan enterprise development is a significant site of adult learning in rural Thailand. Sop Moei Arts enables poor Pwo Karen women and men to earn fair wages for work that draws from indigenous knowledge of weaving, encourages learning and innovation related to product development, and strengthens their communities.

Globally, rural artisans are learning to bridge social, cultural and economic divides to ensure the sustainability of their communities. Indigenous craft knowledge, skills, and aesthetics are being utilized to promote income generation and fair trade in the global marketplace. Livelihoods and cultural practices are being transformed as artisan enterprises strengthen local economies. This paper, based on research in Thailand, focuses on adult learning in the context of community enterprise development among weavers in rural North Thailand.

Globalization and the Asian economic crisis of 1997 have had profound impact on the lives of millions in Asia. Poverty is severe in rural Thailand where people did not benefit from the boom years of Thailand’s economic development; rather, they became victims of environmental destruction, industrialization, marginalization and displacement (Laird, 2000). Among the rural poor are artisans, many of whom are moving away from traditional livelihoods. Lack of access to raw materials and to markets, exploitation by middlemen, low prices for long hours of work, and the devaluing of rural village ways of life, keep wages at poverty level and undermine the sustainability of artisan communities.

However, the crafts sector is significant to the informal economy of Asia, especially as rural non-farm employment (Fisher, Mahajan & Ashok, 1997). For many women, craftwork is a primary source of income that contributes to the economic viability of families and communities. Artisans, who combine crafts production and trade with domestic and subsistence activities, are reaching wider regional and global markets (Grimes & Milgram, 2000). Many community-based organizations are increasing the value of artisan activity by supporting the dignity and autonomy of artisans, continuity of indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity, and sustainability of local economies and communities (Jongeward, 2000).

Sop Moei Arts

In this paper, I focus on the story of one of the 10 organizations in North and Northeastern Thailand where I talked with people who are knowledgeable about the complex issues involved in improving artisan livelihoods. Sop Moei Arts is a unique community development project in Pwo Karen villages in an isolated mountainous region, 280 kilometres

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1One percent of the Thai population, 800,000 people, belongs to nine groups known as hilltribes. The largest group is the Karen, comprised of two linguistically distinct sub-groups: 80% are Sgaw and 20% are Pwo Karen. (Eliot &
west of Chiang Mai in North Thailand. The story of Sop Moei Arts stands out for three reasons: successful integration of projects for health, education, agriculture and income generation; high quality of artisan products; and, commitment to on-going learning and innovation. In the context of Sop Moei Arts, community building involves appreciating the value of age-old cultural knowledge, creating opportunities for learning new ideas and skills, and connecting people in a remote region to the global marketplace.

The project director, Kent Gregory, originally from Sweden, is a Thai citizen who speaks Thai and Karen languages. I met Kent Gregory in Chiang Mai, where he told me his story of Sop Moei Arts. In 1977, he and his wife came to Thailand, with Masters of Public Health, to begin a health programme in remote villages that had no government health services, no roads, no schools, no NGOs. They set up a mobile health clinic in the Sop Moei District, specializing in maternal and child health care, and traveled from village to village by elephant, the only means of transport in the area. With the support of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), for ten years they tried to reduce child malnutrition, which affected 60-65% of the children. Since there were no schools in the mountain villages and the Karen living there were illiterate, they started a scholarship program in 1979 by finding sponsors to help pay school and accommodation expenses for children to attend Thai schools outside the area. Beginning in 1980, an agriculture project was supported by SIDA to improve soil fertility, increase food production and curtail the destruction of forests due to traditional Pwo Karen practices of slash and burn agriculture. About 80 families were helped to establish terraced rice farming until there was no more space in the mountains that could be terraced and irrigated.

Severely malnourished children could be helped temporarily by giving supplementary foods but the cycle of malnutrition recurred because children needed more protein foods. The people didn’t have enough rice and it was almost impossible for them to go outside the area to get rice. And since they basically had a bartering economy, there was no money to buy rice or even the cheapest fish. Seeing that child malnutrition would not go down until the Karen could earn some money, in 1988, Kent Gregory applied for and received a six-year grant from SIDA, to help women earn an income using their indigenous weaving skills.

**Developing New Products**

Karen women have long been prolific weavers. They use backstrap looms to weave lengths of warp ikat cotton cloth that is used for sewing traditional garments. The first major

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2 The backstrap loom, found from the Far East to South America is frameless and portable. The warp (vertical threads) is stretched between two rods; one is fastened to an immovable post and the other to a strap that passes around the back of the weaver who typically sits on the ground. The body of the weaver controls the tension of the warp. The width of the cloth produced is limited to the reach of the body from side to side. (Collingwood, 1982, p.117.)

3 Ikat is a resist-dye technique of patterning cloth, widespread in Southeast Asia. In warp ikat, the warp threads are tied with a material that resists the action of the dye. The tied threads are dyed, retied, dyed again through a number of cycles to build up a colour pattern. After dyeing is completed, all the ties are undone and the warp is
adaptation instigated by the weaving project was to introduce a new loom, which could produce a wider fabric and thereby increase the possibilities for developing different products for sale. They found a large upright frame loom along the Burmese border, which served as a prototype. They took it apart, brought it back to the village and used it to design their new looms. In order to build their looms as cheaply as possible, they felled trees and sawed the lumber by hand.

Belonging to cohesive communities, the Karen are used to working together, not individually. They help on each other’s farms. The women, used to backstrap weaving in a collective space, often help each other in weaving, for example, when a thread breaks. As a consequence of setting up the large new looms in women’s homes, the weavers became separated from each other. They hated the isolation and stopped weaving. When SIDA learned why the women stopped weaving, they provided funds to build a weaving center where people could go to learn and work together.

The women learned to weave on the new looms, making fabric up to 40 inches wide. They continued to make traditional textiles, taking inspiration from their local motifs and patterns, but working on a larger scale. According to terms of funding from the Swedish Government, the women were supposed to become entrepreneurs, sell their own textiles, and over time, work off the cost of their looms. Three years into the weaving project, weavers confronted many difficulties when they began to try to sell their own textiles. To go outside their district to find buyers, the women had to walk two days over the mountains. The first people they encountered were poor Thai farmers. Then there was a language barrier, because the Karen do not speak Thai. Thai buyers in town took advantage of them as tribal people and beat down the price of their work. Then they found that local markets, such as in Chiang Mai, were already selling ethnic textiles with hilltribe motifs at extremely low prices.

Kent Gregory realized that the Pwo Karen women would continue to live in poverty if they tried to compete in the local markets. He advised SIDA that the project would collapse unless the women could weave as a collective and find new ideas to make and add value to the textiles. To meet this challenge, Sop Moei Arts began as community enterprise. They decided to pay weavers four times the typical low rate for weaving in Thailand. But in order to bear the higher price, they had to create a different look for their textiles. They decided to team up with international designers to take inspiration from local textiles and create products for contemporary use.

Ethnic textiles, including traditional Karen textiles, are exuberant in colour and motifs. However, they have limited use in commercial products unless modified, for example, by selecting one motif and making it monochromatic, or using only two or three colours. The first fashion designer to work with the weavers came from England to the villages for five weeks to look at local motifs and develop ideas and sketches for garments. Gregory learned to interpret her drawings, translate the motifs into weaving patterns, which he figured out how to weave and then taught the weavers what to do. For five years this collaboration produced garments, which the designer took to England for sale at exhibitions. Subsequently, with the idea to make clothing more suited to Thai women, Gregory began to design jackets and vests himself based on the look carefully strung on the loom. In weaving the cloth, the plain weft (crosswise threads) links the patterned warp revealing an intricate complex design (Conway, 1992).
of hilltribe garments. However, due to many contingencies in producing and selling fashion items—the colour, price, and occasion for wearing them all have to be right—Sop Moei Arts shifted emphasis to developing products for home interiors. These include tablemats and runners, wall hangings, and baskets.

Low prices and competition from cheap commercial products signal the end to local production of traditional craft items, including baskets. Pwo Karen baskets, indigenous to the Sop Moei District, can be found for sale inexpensively in Chiang Mai shops. The men who make them earn very little. In 1992, within a year of the building of a road into their district, indigenous basket making quickly began to disappear. For example, men used to make a little sewing basket for women, taking about one week to go and get the bamboo, prepare the bamboo and the rattan, and then weave a basket. With the arrival of the road, merchants brought cheap little plastic buckets, which people began to buy.

Seeing that the local basketry was going to disappear, Sop Moei Arts began a basket programme for men. They didn’t have external funding, but they used the little income they had started to generate from the textiles. Using as models old baskets that Gregory had found over the years in antique shops, they reintroduced six Pwo Karen baskets that had stopped being made a generation or two earlier. They also began to make baskets based on Lao and Vietnamese traditional baskets, retaining all the details of the originals.

**Extending Market Options**

Increasing access to markets is a fundamental concern of artisan enterprises. In the early years as a member of the non-profit fair trade organization, the Thai Craft Association, Sop Moei Arts participated at ThaiCraft Fairs in Bangkok. In 1997, to increase their visibility and sales, Sop Moei Arts opened a shop in Chiang Mai. The shop was a necessary extension of the weaving project because the expansion of markets was critical to giving more people in the villages an opportunity to participate and benefit. Gradually, by word of mouth or through magazine articles, more visitors came into the shop. In three years, Sop Moei Arts was becoming known, not only in Chiang Mai but also regionally. Although they don’t have money for advertising, they have been featured in several Thai magazines, Japanese publications and El Décor. Journalists, impressed by the shop in Chiang Mai, have traveled to the villages with their photographers to record the story of Sop Moei Arts.

By means of exhibitions four times a year at the Hilton Hotel, and a small shop run by volunteers, Sop Moei Arts reaches the marketplace in Bangkok. More recently, a website promotes their work globally; and it reflects the same attention to detail and pride in the community as do their artisan products. Images and stories represent the work of Sop Moei Arts, including examples of textiles and baskets with the dimensions and prices. Of particular interest is the image of a wall hanging that won the Japanese Foreign Minister's Award at the Asian Arts Festival in 1998. The success of this textile, woven in the village and selected for exhibition at the Museum of Art in Fukuoka, Japan, thrilled the people of Sop Moei Arts. Reproductions of the award winning wall hanging are now part of a collection of 15 one-of-a kind artworks for sale in the shop or by Internet.

**Learning and innovation**
Quality control, a major challenge for artisan enterprises, prompted a crisis about two years into the weaving project. When the women began earning a wage from weaving, they faced a demand to make good quality work. Many women created beautiful work right from the start, but others did not. Traditionally, no one dictated about the quality of the weaver’s work, but now they were being paid for making cloth intended for sale. Weaving that was poor quality could not be used and Gregory found himself in the position of asking unskilled weavers to try and improve. Some women who were content to weave ragged edges or leave broken yarns untied came to resent Kent’s admonition and they quit in frustration. Those who continued learned that they were no longer weaving for themselves, but for someone else and according to someone else’s idea of quality.

Gregory recognized that the situation was hard on people. He sympathized with them but he knew that in order to sell the work and get as good an income as possible for them, “they had to dance to someone else’s music.” It was a foreign idea and there were hard feelings but each of the women who had quit came back after several years and asked to weave again. Now, when people start weaving, they know the condition and the standard of work. Everybody knows and tells one another what the work needs to be like; Gregory doesn’t have to tell them. In a more recent example, at one of the new weaving instruction centers, several young weavers chew tobacco and sometimes drop the juices on the 100% silk scarves they’re weaving. Stains cannot be removed even by dry cleaning. After they were told once or twice that they would not be paid for that piece and, because silk is expensive, they would be deducted for the actual cost of the silk, the problem was solved.

How to transform traditional local craftwork into contemporary products for urban markets is a consistent theme in the emergence of successful artisan enterprises. In order to distinguish its’ products from the many ethnic-inspired textiles for sale in Chiang Mai and the rest of Thailand, Sop Moei Arts has asked international textile and fashion consultants not only to come up with design ideas but also to teach the weavers how to look at their indigenous designs and reinterpret them for contemporary use. Significantly, their strategy has been to encourage the creativity of weavers to come up with modern interpretations of Pwo Karen patterns and products and also take inspiration from other Southeast Asian textiles.

There are differences in how the weavers respond to this call for innovation. And new kinds of experience help facilitate the process. To begin with, all the women who come to weave have basic weaving skills. The majority wants to be told what to do and follow clear instructions. They look on weaving as a job and secure income. They don’t want to damage their weaving because they know they are being paid well for their work. When Gregory asks, “What do you think about your textile?” they don’t know what to say. Other weavers are more outspoken and a few will say, “When I did it that way, I think it looked better.” Several will take a risk and try something they want to do. Often, when Gregory is about to leave the village for a while, he purposefully tells the weavers it’s up to them what they do. Some weavers appreciate this and later they discuss what makes this or that textile better. One of the first men who wove scarves for Sop Moei Arts is now in charge of a weaving instruction center because he is a good designer and does beautiful work. Colour selection is done collaboratively with Gregory, but colour arrangement and balance is left up to him.

It is important for weavers to know about what happens to the textiles--where they go and
what’s their purpose. When Sop Moei Arts exhibits their work at the Hilton Hotel in Bangkok, Gregory sometimes takes weavers with him. This is a new experience for them; they have an opportunity to learn what happens to their textiles and how other people live. Because they know more, they get ideas about what can be done with the textiles and baskets. For example, a basket maker who had been to Bangkok for exhibitions many times, created a new small basket that preserved all the details of a large dome-shaped basket that people use in the mountains as a trunk for storing blankets and clothing. Explaining his innovation, he said he made it because he had heard customers say, “I’d love to buy that basket, but I can’t get it on the plane.” Another time, he made a small basketry lamp based on a large one that Gregory had designed. He took about two months to pull the original apart and remake it in a smaller size because he learned that foreign houses have small bedside lamps.

Making a Difference in the Sop Moei District

In May 2000 there were 60 textile weavers, on average 22 years old, working for Sop Moei Arts in seven villages. Although weaving is traditionally a women’s activity and men would never have considered using a backstrap loom, about 12 men are weaving on the large looms. And women are making baskets, traditionally the work of men. These changes are happening because of income earned through weaving activity. A woman working at the loom makes 6000 Baht per month ($240 Canadian). Or she can earn up to 10,000 Baht if she wants to weave more. A man, hired to work on a farm, earns a maximum of 2000 Baht per month. Since women’s income through weaving is much greater, men have begun to view weaving as an alternative kind of employment.

Sop Moei Arts now has three weaving instruction centers and a basketry workshop in widely separated villages. In villages where there is no weaving center, a structure has been built where three women can work together. Continually, more Karen ask to work in the weaving project. While at least 10 more looms could be put to use, Sop Moei Arts is cautious about taking on more people because they must be able to pay weavers right away upon completing their textiles, not five months later. And Sop Moei Arts is too small to afford to keep a large stock of unsold products. They need to match the market demand in order to sell things quickly in the shop and be able to pay the weavers well. However, recently six more weavers joined; their looms are built and they are ready to start weaving.

The income generated by artisans is having a significant impact on improving levels of health and education in the area. Artisans are paid 60% of the money from sales and their families benefit directly by having more money for food. 40% of Sop Moei Arts’ income is allocated to a scholarship fund to help any Pwo Karen in the project area who needs financial assistance for education. This includes children who have to go to live in town to attend school beyond grade four or six, which is now available in many of the villages. It also includes students who attend high school and university, a significant accomplishment for villages where no one reads or writes. Increasing the possibility for continuing education outside their communities, Sop Moei Arts also hopes that students will return to assist the community development work in their villages. To this end, they ask university level students to come back and work as employees of Sop Moei Arts for a minimum of two years; otherwise their scholarships are considered as loans to be repaid over a period of time. Ultimately, the goal is for Sop Moei Arts to be operated entirely by people
indigenous to the region.

Conclusion

Although Adult Education as a field of practice, research, and theory is shifting boundaries and drawing on new perspectives, knowledge about diverse approaches to creating and sustaining communities is a theme that links the past and future of Adult Education. Given an environment of cultural and economic globalization, stories of community building, such as the one in this paper, among rural poor in Thailand have implications for future developments of Adult Education. A complexity of adult learning issues need to be examined in context, including, issues of organizing and innovating for the benefit of community enterprise development.

Traditional methods and forms of craft reflect millennia of cultural adaptation and change that occur at the interface between cultures, generations, and creative individuals. The current intersection of the needs of low-income artisans in rural areas and the desires of urban consumers, often in far away places, has instigated both the organization of grass roots community enterprises and a wide range of craft adaptation and innovation. Adult educators in Canada have significant roles to play in extending the boundary of care and concern to include distant places and people - an ethic of sustainability. As researchers and educators we can listen to and tell the stories and generate theory that reflects the diversity and complexity of responses among individuals and at the level of local communities to the impacts of globalization.

Lifelong learning in the context of rural Thailand centers on questions of survival and what needs to be learned in order for communities and environments to be sustainable. Community ownership of economic development is a vehicle for learning, simultaneously in local and global communities. In a process that starts with the hands of rural artisans in Asia and finishes when a craft item reaches the hands of distant consumers there are possibilities for increasing awareness of economic connectedness and social responsibility in the global marketplace. This is a fertile ground for adult learning.

References