

Building capacity and skills in crafters

Many of the crafters in the rural Chief Albert Luthuli district in Mpumalanga, are survivalists eking out a living by producing goods to sell to occasional tourists. To support them as income generators in the community, the MTN SA Foundation appointed Art Aid, a Nelspruit-based arts development agency, to run a six-month Craft Capacity-building Programme. Launched in October 2012, the aim of this initiative – which is replicated in five other rural areas across South Africa – is to build product development skills among ten crafters in the area.

Local trainers have many advantages, not least that they instinctively understand the community needs and facilitate communication. Art Aid's product development specialist, John Anthony Boerma, described the organisation's work: "We focus on developing the crafters' core skills, while retaining the character of the region. There's no point in trying to copy something from America," he says. "They need to keep the essence of their district so that their products are unique."

The crafters also learn business skills, and are encouraged to understand their target markets. After the initial workshop, the crafters are mentored for the remaining six months, during which time Art Aid visits them at their own production sites. "It's here we can help them implement what they have



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23-year-old crafter,
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learned at the workshop," says Boerma. "The crafters are more receptive in their own environments because the ideas make more sense when they are put into practice. We help them come up with solutions to specific challenges."

Mafika Nkosi is a 23-year-old crafter who has benefited from the Foundation's work. From a basket-weaving family, Nkosi started selling baskets when he was a teenager to help his family earn money. Though his weaving skills were already highly developed when he joined the programme, he was able to get creative input to improve his work. "I learned that I can put colours on my baskets. This is great!" says Nkosi. "I even developed a Scottish-inspired pattern for the tourists. This has really improved my business."

The Foundation's Craft Capacity-building Programme, which has now assisted 60 crafters countrywide, supports the government's "arts for all" goals which are being expressed through the Department of Arts and Culture's development strategy. The Department, working together with the Foundation's BSC, is a valued programme partner in the Chief Albert Luthuli area, and has been instrumental in creating market opportunities for the ten crafters. "The Department sends us to exhibitions where we can sell our goods and find new customers. So one day I will have a big company and export my baskets," says Nkosi, who already has his entire family working for him and is looking for more employees.

Product development is very specific and takes time. To enhance the impact of the programme, the Foundation is supporting further training with a small group of the crafters who have shown an aptitude for business. This continuation is appreciated by the Department of Arts and Culture, which hopes to partner with the MTN SA Foundation to develop many more artists in the future. Nkosi is optimistic too: "I think this is great and I hope that MTN can help more people, because they are doing a good job."

