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Designing for Social Change:

How Can Collaborations Between Western Designers and African Grassroots Crafts Projects be Most Successful?

This study aims to advance understanding on collaborations between African grassroots craft development projects and Western designers by analysing past collaborations in order to define common, success indicators. Two such case studies, Gantsi Craft in Botswana and Made in Kenya, were examined to determine the positive and negative impact of collaborations with Western designers and how successful practice could be maximised.

The British Council 2005 exhibition 'My World: New Subjectivity in Design' argues that: 'There has been a resurgence of interest in local craft, particularly in the materials and techniques that define artefacts of a world new to design – like India, Africa and Brazil ... this interest is spurred by a desire to preserve as well as advance craft skills that are at risk of erasure through cultural obsolescence.' (British Council, 2005)

This resurgence can be seen as an antidote to the fast paced, cheap, mass-produced, uninspired goods increasingly available on every homogenised British high street. There are many organisations, such as Aid to Artisans and the UN's International Trade Centre, partnering Western designers with African grassroots crafts projects to capitalise on this resurgence with varied results. Previous studies have identified the criteria of skills exchange, effective communication, product development, capacity building, access to new markets and sustainability as some of the determining factors in success.

Working in collaboration with two African grassroots craft projects, interviewing key stakeholders and analysing supporting secondary literature will establish whether such collaborations are successful and sustainable. By assessing the success indicators it is anticipated that designers need to approach such collaborations from a holistic standpoint, rather than solely a design perspective, to effect social change in the most successful way.