

Crafting a Post Covid-19 World: Building Greater Resilience in the Crafts Sector through Strengthening Ties with its Community's Cultural System

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Abstract

In the pre-Covid-19 era, the crafts sector in Asia had ridden on the crest of globalized trade and international tourism. It had transformed itself dramatically from serving the needs of its community and acting as a conduit of cultural expressions to a labour intensive production unit catering to demands of mainly non-local markets.

However, Covid-19 has brought an untimely demise to these evolved craft-based industries. The collapse of the global economy and the abrupt halt of international travel have jeopardized those who depended on this sector for their livelihoods.

Rather than seeing this period as a tragedy, this paper proposes that the craft sector could also consider this as a unique opportunity to build greater resilience to mitigate against similar future occurrence. One means is to re-visit the nature of crafts and re-establish its networks within the community's cultural system. This echo the theoretical framework of crafts - an entity which is rooted in and reflective of the cultural lives of the community; it encompasses the body of expressive cultural associated within the fields of a community's folklore and cultural heritage.

This paper examines two case-studies where craft producing communities have sustained themselves through focusing on their local traditional markets and also re-integrated themselves into the local cultural system.

The first case study cites the crafts sector of Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Because of the context of Afghanistan, any form of export from the valley of Bamiyan is, at best, challenging. Yet, the craft industry has survived through the ravages of war and uncertainties. Utilizing the data from recent UNESCO pilot surveys on the supply and demand of the crafts sector, this paper describes and explains the intimate relationship between crafts and the practicing cultural ecosystem in Bamiyan. As a result, even in this war-torn country with limited opportunities,

the crafts sector has been sustained, relatively unaffected by external forces.

The second case study examines a ceramic production unit in Bali and its innovative response during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the pre-Covid period, the marketing channel of this thriving craft enterprise was through the hospitality industry; hotels and resorts purchased their flatware for their food and beverage outlets. A significant percentage was also marketed through their retail outlets, targeting at expatriates living in Southeast Asia. However, due to the decline of the markets from these sectors, this craft enterprise has re-aligned itself by linking its products to the traditional cuisines of Indonesia, namely targeting both its domestic and non-domestic markets.

Thus, paper proposes that one means of building greater resilience for the crafts sector is to strengthen its network with the local cultural system and to re-focus on the local community as its primary market. Ironically, it is only through diving deep into the roots and the *raison d'être* of the practice that the crafts sector, like a tree, will be able to strength itself to mitigate against future crisis, reaching greater heights.