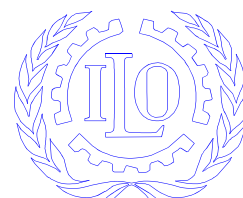


ILO/SAMAT Discussion Paper No. 18

**COPING WITH EXTREME POVERTY THROUGH TRADITIONAL SKILLS:
THE CASE OF THE *XIRUNDZU* BASKET MAKERS OF MOZAMBIQUE**

Fion de Vletter



**International Labour Organization
SOUTHERN AFRICA MULTIDISCIPLINARY ADVISORY TEAM (ILO/SAMAT)
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Table of Contents

Foreword	vii
1. Introduction	1
2. Objectives of the study	1
3. Methodology and sample	2
4. The art of making <i>xirundzus</i> and their importance to the local economy	3
5. The economy of <i>xirundzu</i> making areas of Inhambane	5
6. A socio-economic profile of basket makers	8
<i>Xixongue</i>	8
<i>Funhalouro</i>	10
<i>Pembarra</i>	10
7. Recognising the potential of the <i>xirundzu</i> as a poverty reduction strategy	11
8. Recommendations	12
<i>Production methodology</i>	12
<i>Marketing and sales</i>	13
<i>Commercial intermediation</i>	13
References	14

Foreword

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is a member of the United Nations family of organizations whose special mandate is the promotion of safe and decent work in all countries of the world. Unlike other specialised UN agencies, the ILO is a tripartite organization, and each country is represented not only by its government but also by the representatives of its workers and employers. Similarly, ILO services are provided to trade unions and employers associations as well as to governments. Over the eight decades since its establishment in 1919, the ILO has promulgated a large body of Conventions which deal with labour and social issues. The general thinking behind these Conventions is that, as stated in the Preamble to the ILO Constitution, “the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries”. The Conventions establish benchmarks for all governments in their efforts to promote decent and safe working conditions, and can also discourage backsliding by member States.

In the global economy, the fulfilment of the ILO’s mandate requires new and innovative approaches. To better equip the organization to pursue its mandate in the next century, the ILO Director-General has formulated four strategic objectives. These are:

- (i) promoting and realising fundamental principles and rights at work;
- (ii) creating greater opportunities for women and men to secure decent employment and income;
- (iii) enhancing the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all; and
- (iv) strengthening tripartism and social dialogue.

These objectives will focus ILO activities in the coming years, providing complementary and mutually reinforcing approaches to ensuring decent work for all people.

In the mid-1990s, the ILO sought to move even closer to its constituents through a major decentralisation of staff, resources, and authority. Under its Active Partnership Policy, it established multidisciplinary advisory teams in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe. These teams include specialists in areas such as labour standards, employment and labour markets, small enterprise development, occupational safety and health, social security, industrial relations, labour administration, workers’ and employers’ activities, statistics and training, as well as in such cross-cutting issues as gender. Demand driven, the teams respond to requests from ILO member States, trade unions, and employers associations for advice on policy issues and assist governments in the design and implementation of development programmes and projects. The Southern Africa Multidisciplinary Advisory Team (SAMAT), based in Harare, Zimbabwe, provides these services to nine countries in Southern Africa.

As one of its services, SAMAT publishes a series of discussion papers on labour and social issues of which this paper is a part. Through this series, SAMAT seeks to create an ongoing dialogue with governments, workers and employers by promoting the ratification and application of the ILO Conventions in a regional context, presenting ideas for new labour and

social policy directions, and providing regional statistical data and comparative analyses which enable the member States to learn from others' experiences.

I am pleased to present this latest contribution to the ILO/SAMAT Discussion Paper Series entitled 'Coping with Extreme Poverty through Traditional Skills: The Case of the *Xirundzu* Basket Makers of Mozambique' The paper is one of the background documents prepared in the context of the Study on the Feminisation of Poverty in Mozambique that is being executed by the International Labour Organization's Southern Africa Multidisciplinary Advisory Team (ILO/SAMAT) in Harare, with funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Maputo. The background documents prepared under the project consist of conceptual and empirical reviews of the literature on gender and poverty in Mozambique, an analysis of existing survey data in the country from the perspective of the feminisation of poverty, and a set of case studies on coping mechanisms of poor women. These were discussed at two workshops held in Maputo on 22 February and in Nampula on 26 February 2001. They will subsequently be consolidated into a synthesis report.

This paper was prepared by Mr. Fion de Vletter, a development consultant based in Maputo, Mozambique.

I would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to colleagues, both within and outside of the ILO, who contributed in various ways to the project, and to the UNDP Maputo which not only funded the project but also participated actively in its formulation and execution.

Ullrich H. Flechsenhar,
Director,
ILO/SAMAT

1. Introduction

When I was asked to co-ordinate the Study on Feminisation of Poverty in Mozambique, I suggested that a case study be included on *xirundzu* basket makers (located in isolated areas of Inhambane and Gaza Provinces). The baskets, despite their beauty and quality have, until recently, not had any commercial exposure and are generally not known to the outside world. In 1997, I saw and bought a *xirundzu* for the first time from a vendor in Massinga market. Despite various efforts to locate the producers, I failed: the Massinga vendors were vague about where the *xirundzus* were actually made. It was only with the collaboration of Tom Parker of the British Volunteer organisation VSO and his Mozambican assistants that we finally managed to buy enough baskets to hold an exhibition in mid-1999, the first known public exposure of *xirundzus*. In August 2000, while setting up this case study (in Inhambane), I first encountered the women producing *xirundzus*. I was shocked at their poverty. These were truly the poorest of the poor, despite their skills. Here was a clear case of feminisation of poverty suffered by a very vulnerable group of Mozambican society – old single women – who were becoming poorer as the demand for their products diminishes and as the safety net features of their society showed serious signs of cracking.

Inhambane Province is one of the three provinces of southern Mozambique – one of the highest per capita labour exporting zones in the world. Normally, families of the absentee workers benefit greatly from income transfers, but our interviews showed that, not only had many of the women basket makers suffered from separation or death of their absent husbands, many had not received any means of support from absentee children and were left to fend entirely for themselves, with occasional assistance from sympathetic neighbours.

This paper attempts to draw donor and Government attention to the plight of these women and argue a case for direct intervention, not only to reduce the level of their suffering but to seize the opportunity of saving the *xirundzus* from inevitable extinction and to promote these valuable traditional skills with the objective of creating a dynamic and sustainable cottage industry.

2. Objectives of the study

This study has two specific objectives. The first is to show the importance of traditional skills as a means of survival for the rural ultra poor and the most vulnerable populations. In this case, the production of the little known *xirundzu* baskets by women in Inhambane Province is examined. The second objective is to look at the potential for expanding the markets for these traditional skills as an effective and sustainable income generating and hence poverty reduction strategy. This case study is particularly poignant for several reasons. The first is that these skills are practised by the most vulnerable of the rural poor, i.e. older women who are widows, divorced or abandoned by their husbands and who, in the majority of cases, have nothing apart from these skills and the meagre production from their *machambas* (small agricultural fields) on which to survive. Second, the skills practised by these women are of exceptionally high quality value, comparable to the best basket makers in the southern Africa, yet almost totally unrecognised as a worthy handicraft outside of the regions of production. Third, and perhaps of greatest concern, this skill will almost certainly disappear within 10-20 years as it is not being passed on to younger generations who are opting for other income generating alternatives.

For some inexplicable reason, *xirundzu* baskets have, until recently, escaped any sort of recognition by craft purchasers: it can be safely said that almost all *xirundzu* baskets were made entirely for the traditional purposes of carrying foodstuffs and other material. The baskets are found in only some markets along the main highway EN1 of Inhambane (e.g. Morrumbene and Massinga which are a considerable distance away from the producing areas) and are common in some remote areas such as Mabote and Funhalouro, as well as the interior of Gaza.

The making of *xirundzu* baskets has been passed down from mother-to-daughter for many generations. There is now, however, disturbing evidence that the craft is unlikely to continue into the next generation. Interviews have shown that basket makers are now mostly older than 40 years with almost none having succeeded in passing on their skills to their daughters or anyone who might be interested in learning.

Women in southern Mozambique have, on the whole, been assumed to benefit from a socio-economic system that provides them with considerably more wealth than women from other parts of Mozambique. The migrant labour system has usually meant that absent husbands would remit income and transfer goods to support their households. In many African societies, one finds that children support ageing parents, in particular widowed or abandoned mothers, even more so when these children (mainly sons) are absent wage earners. Another form of traditional social security was provided through the custom of a widow “marrying” the brother of the dead husband. Our survey showed that this happened on various occasions.

This case study of basket makers draws attention to those women who have been marginalised by a system of social relations when it breaks down. The study shows that a disturbingly high percentage of women are victims of these breakdowns. The system usually breaks down as a consequence of three common situations: one is when the supporting husband dies (there is strong evidence that the average migrant worker live considerably less than their spouses due to the danger associated with their workplace, especially the mines, and living environment, the rapid rise of HIV/AIDS amongst migrant workers, etc.); the second is the not uncommon occurrence of workers abandoning their wives; and, finally, when, as our interviews show, mothers are effectively abandoned by their sons and daughters and left to eke out a living from their *machambas* and the limited options available to them in isolated rural areas. For many, the making of *xirundzus* provides the necessary cash income to survive.

The initial findings of this study suggest that the marginalisation of vulnerable women, particularly in the southern part of Mozambique, will worsen as the formal economy – whether in South Africa or in the nearby urban areas – offers a higher rate of return per hour of employment compared to rural income opportunities. Such marginalisation and, implicitly, the feminisation of poverty appear to be much more acute in the South than in other parts of Mozambique as there is evidence that there are less disparities in rural-urban earnings and quality of life in rural areas north of the River Save.

3. Methodology and sample

Very little is known about the location of *xirundzus* makers except that broadly the producing area appears to be in the northwest of Inhambane Province and northeast of Gaza Province – one of the least populated and isolated parts of the country. One of the unique aspects of the sample area is that there are almost no exogenous demand influences affecting the production

of *xirundzus*. These baskets, despite their beauty and highly skilled craftsmanship, are produced exclusively for traditional purposes. It is almost inevitable that the demand for these baskets will decrease as cheaper and more durable plastic containers serve as substitutes. But many areas are still relatively unaffected by modern substitutes and we were fortunate enough to be able to observe a craft being produced, sold and used in exclusively traditional ways in areas that are very much affected by influences of the modern formal economy (by way of outmigration and income transfers). *Xirundzu* makers often depend on their skills to cope with the vulnerability that is typically brought about by the death or abandonment of a spouse, the outmigration of children who neglect their traditional obligation of supporting their elders, etc.

Three days were spent driving through known *xirundzu* producing areas in Inhambane, identifying three interview zones: Funhalouro, Xixongue and Pembarra. Funhalouro represents an area in which *xirundzu* makers are dispersed rather widely amongst the surrounding homesteads (usually separated in these areas by a distance of about 100-200 metres). The second area, Xixongue, is a small orderly village located about 15 km northwest of Mabote (about 100 km north of Funhalouro). In this village of about 100 families, most women aged 40 years or more were involved in the making of baskets. Because of the high concentration of producers, this village was chosen for the establishment of an experimental producer association. The third area, Pembarra, is located at the crossroads of the EN1 and the turn-off to Vilanculos – a town exposed to heavy traffic movements and tourist flows. Two interviewers, Emilia Polana and Carla Márcia, senior students from the University of Eduardo Mondlane, were left in Pembarra where interviews were started (August 2000); one then returned to Funhalouro and the other to Xixongue. Interviews were conducted over a period of ten days for each student. A total of 27 interviews were undertaken with basket makers and with a number of basket users: 5 basket makers were interviewed in Funhalouro, 17 in Xixongue, and 5 in Pembarra.

Interviews were conducted with known *xirundzu* makers in the survey areas. Interviews were semi-structured, following a list of topics but flexible enough to allow open discourse on any issue. Each of the interviews was recorded in notebooks as well as the general impressions of the socio-economic environment of each study zone.

4. The art of making *xirundzus* and their importance to the local economy

Almost no literature exists on *xirundzu* baskets. The only reference found to date is the book on *The Art of Africa* by Battiss et al. (1958), from which we learn:

The Tsonga used to be expert basket makers, but the art is rapidly disappearing. The *milala palm* (*ilala* palm) ... provides them with a magnificent material for basket making. This palm is found all over Tsongaland, in the plains towards the coast ... As an instance of this art, a conical basket, the *shirundzu*, is chosen, which the Tsonga women use for carrying maize, clay, manure, etc. It is made on the same pattern as the roof of a hut pointed downwards, the ribs of the *milala* folioles taking the place of the sticks to provide the general frame upon which the strips or straws of *milala* leaves are plaited (Battiss et al., 1958, p. 75).

The above refers largely to *xirundzu* making by the South African Tsongas where the art has virtually disappeared, if it still exists at all.

Xirundzu baskets are conical and made in varying sizes, the most common being approximately 50-60 cm in diameter and 20 cm high. Baskets, with the exception of a few that use chemical dyes for colouring, are made exclusively from local materials. The majority of baskets are made of only two materials: a thin creeper called *titsambe* and stripped fronds (*palha*) from the *milala* palm. *Titsambe* is used to make the basic shape structure of the basket, while the *palha* is used more for decorative purposes. Each region has very distinct ways of making *xirundzus*. Some areas make baskets exclusively of *titsambe*, weaving it so closely that the baskets and other items such as cups that are made with this technique are virtually watertight. Other areas apply the *palha* in textured geometric layers, sometimes colouring the decorative parts in various shades of brown made from dyes derived from roots (*nhie*). In one area baskets are reinforced with a cross made from bark and decorated with a sisal embroidery. Though a variety of shapes and patterns exist, each area has its own particular type of basket, and within that area basket makers rarely break from the set pattern/shape to experiment with new designs. Interviewed consumers of *xirundzus* gave very little importance to design of the basket when they bought it.

Older and busier women will usually buy *titsambe* from boys or men who collect the creeper, found as far away as 15 km from their homesteads. About 5,000 Mt of *titsambe* is necessary for one standard basket that would contain a *lata* (20 kg) of maize grain. Others collect *titsambe* on their way to working on their *machambas*.

Though *xirundzus* are a fairly secure way of obtaining income for anyone who has basic acceptable skills, not one respondent was willing to give priority to *xirundzu* making over the production of food crops. Living on the extreme edge of poverty has made these populations very aware of the high risks surrounding their daily struggle to survive. For the vast majority of Mozambican peasants the *machamba* is the focal point of activity as in all but the worst years subsistence production provides the bulk of the homestead's food requirements.

Because *xirundzu* production is dependent almost entirely on local demand, it ironically does not serve as a safety-net alternative to poor crops. Our survey was conducted soon after the disastrous floods of early 2000. Though the areas surveyed were not in floodplains, the only crop that survived the excessive rains was mandioc. As most homesteads in the surveyed areas suffered poor food crops, this translated into lower disposable income for anything but basic foodstuffs, thus resulting in reduced demand for *xirundzu* baskets. Some of our respondents who were not supported by outside remittances stated that they found basket making difficult because they were so hungry.

There are basically two types of purchasers of *xirundzus*: local users found in the producing areas and market vendors found in certain markets up to 150 km from the producing areas (principally Vilanculos, Massinga and Morrumbene). Local users are peasant women who use *xirundzus* for both carrying and storing. In the producing areas *xirundzus* are often seen on the heads of women (normally balanced by a donut-shaped rolled cloth), usually returning from their *machambas* laden with maize cobs, mandioc or beans in their baskets. On the way to the *machambas* they sometimes carry manure from their own or neighbouring homesteads. These users appreciate both the shape (handy for carrying) and the texture (difficult to slip) of the baskets. In contrast, plastic buckets or basins are preferred for storage and have the big advantage over *xirundzus* of longevity. Although *xirundzus* can last for years, they tend to rot when wet. Both basket makers and users see the writing on the wall for *xirundzus*, feeling that they are being substituted at quite a fast pace. Judging from user responses, the biggest obstacle to faster replacement are the long distances (i.e. costs) to the big markets such as

Massinga where plastic containers can be bought relatively cheaper. Market vendors like to use *xirundzus* for two principal reasons. First, the baskets fit nicely into the *latas* (large standard volume tins) in which their produce is carried (and measured when purchasing from suppliers). And, second, the baskets are used for attractive display purposes and are easy for scooping smaller measurements (*canecas*). *Xirundzus* are most commonly used by women who do not have fixed stalls (*bancas*) and have to set up their makeshift market space everyday. Though the vendors seem to be happy with their *xirundzus*, there are only a few markets where they are commonly used and it seems inevitable that their usage amongst the vendors will eventually disappear.

Xirundzu making is normally pursued as an activity after all other economic activities and most household chores are completed. Usually this is done over a period of about 2 hours at the end of the afternoon and in early evening. There is some seasonality in basket production as the months with little need for work on *machambas* allow for more free time for basket making.

Most women interviewed stated that they started learning to make baskets at the age of 10-12, most having learned from their mothers but some acquiring the skills from neighbours.

It is difficult to estimate the amount of time that goes into making a *xirundzu*, but respondent reactions suggest that a basket could be made during a fortnight of working sessions of two hours a day. Assuming a sale price of 30,000 Mt for a medium-large basket, input costs of 5,000 Mt, and two hours collection time for materials, the return to labour would amount to 25,000 Mt for 32 hours of work, or about 800 Mt (\$0.05) per hour and about 40 cents for an 8-hour day. This is about a quarter of the daily minimum wage of about \$1.50.

No women were encountered making baskets in a way that could be regarded as a serious income generating activity. Most were producing on a casual basis and selling to neighbours. None of our respondents reported selling to intermediaries for re-selling. Such intermediaries do exist, however. During our visits to these areas we encountered the local secretary of the *Bairro* in Pembarra who had stockpiled six baskets to sell to informal vendors at the Vilanculos market some 25 km away. In Mabote we found young boys trying to sell *xirundzus* in the street. And in Massinga market where many of the market vendors use *xirundzus* coming from substantial distances away, we were told that basket sellers come from these areas from time to time.

In Pembarra it is normally accepted practice to put down a 50 per cent deposit when ordering *xirundzus*. Although deposits are required by some women in more isolated areas, orders are usually taken in good faith.

5. The economy of *xirundzu* making areas of Inhambane

The areas associated with *xirundzu* making in Inhambane and Gaza are some of the most isolated and sparsely populated in the country. The main road directly joining Funhalouro to Mabote (the two main towns of western Inhambane) is hardly used and in places virtually disappears. Passenger services between the two towns are provided by open *bakkies* (pick-up van) twice a week. The roads joining Funhalouro and Mabote directly to the EN1 are each about 100 km of dirt and cost about 40,000 Mt (\$2.50) by *chapa* (return) to reach the main highway EN1 (a comparatively large sum in these areas).

Apart from a few public sector positions, there is virtually no formal sector employment in these areas. The vast majority of the population is involved in subsistence agriculture. As with most of southern Mozambique, the main source of cash income is through migrant labour. The interviews for this study dramatically show the large extent to which the adult male (and to some extent female) is involved in wage employment in either South Africa or elsewhere in Mozambique. Many of these workers are migrants, oscillating between their rural households and workplaces. Migrants working in South Africa are commonly referred to as *Majonjons* (“those coming from Johannesburg”). *Majonjon* households are normally distinguished from the average poor subsistence household by their use of modern building materials. Other common distinguishing characteristics are the presence of a *bakkie*, solar panel generator, powerful music systems and large plastic water containers. Despite the prevalence of absent wage-earners, interviews showed that many households do not receive any support from these wage-earners. As in any environment where the migrant labour system is dominant, the percentage of female-headed households – *de jure* and *de facto* – is much higher than in non-migrant areas. Interviews show that husbands – even those who assiduously support their households – are away for long periods, perhaps returning 2-3 times a year at the most. A high proportion of women are widows, the result of dangerous working and living conditions in South Africa, now compounded by the HIV/AIDS epidemic which is said to affect almost half of the Mozambican miners in that country. Many of the respondents spoke of having been abandoned by husbands who left for South Africa or other destinations.

Despite the volume of transferred income from migrant workers, the bulk of these transfers comes in the form of consumer goods and building materials. As a result, the circulating cash in these economies is limited and much of the economic exchange is the form of barter.

Though Mozambicans can be extremely poor, there is one common right they all have that allows them a minimum of dignity: the right to land and to farm a *machamba*. Interviews in Inhambane and amongst the flood victims of Gaza illustrated just how important this right is for the poor and their ability to survive. Apart from purchases of salt, the poorest households managed to survive entirely on the food produced from their *machambas*. A common form of supplementary “income” (usually in kind) was through the mutual support tradition of *chitoco* when members within a community help a *machambeiro* prepare his/her land, weeding, etc. Most households in Mozambique, even the poorest, have some form of non-agricultural source of income. The brewing of traditional drinks is one of the commonest. In less forested areas, firewood selling is also important. The growth of market vending in response to economic reform has been phenomenal, being most evident where the circulation of cash is comparatively plentiful. In Fonhalouro and Xixongue, the prevailing poverty and limited amounts of cash led to the relative underdevelopment of informal markets, even when there were virtually no shops.

The making of *xirundzus* is entirely done by women. The male equivalent is the making of *celeiros* – traditional maize silos. These silos vary in size from about 0.75 m diameter and a metre high to more than 1.5 metres wide and almost 2 metres high. They are made with cords of rolled grass, held together with strips of bark. Average sized *celeiros* sell for about 200,000 Mt (\$12).

Subsistence crops are primarily maize, mandioc, sorghum and *mexoeira* and various types of beans and grown on *machambas*, usually located a fair distance from the principal homestead. A fair number of the respondents indicated that their *machambas* were located 7-10 km from their homes and that they had built small huts at their farms to stay overnight,

returning the next day. Crops are primarily grown for feeding household members and, in some years, good growing conditions allow for small surpluses to be sold. For those households not receiving support through remittances, etc., small amounts of cash are generated from the production of *xirundzus* or other informal income generating activities such as the production of traditional drinks. The informal sector, in particular vending, in these areas is much less developed than one is accustomed to in similar concentrations of populations in other more developed (rural) areas of Mozambique. Hunting is very common and is an important source of cash income and nutrition.

Though bartering is very common in these areas, cash is needed for the purchase of salt, soap, *capulana* (brightly coloured cloth), medical expenses (hospital, *curandeiro*), school fees and transport. Some basket makers claimed that previously *xirundzus* were exchanged for *capulanas*.

Many youth are said not to attend school because of their involvement in animal husbandry and because the schools are often very far away. None of the schools in the areas studied went past 7th *classe*. Considerable variation was found amongst respondents in terms of sending kids to school. Some sent all, some sent no one (could not afford) and some sent some kids and not others (selecting according to available resources). Interestingly, respondents claimed that old prejudices towards favouring boys to attend school appear to have changed now that the proportions between girls and boys appear equal.

Interviews showed that most of the younger generations have left their households for more distant places – mostly larger urban centres (Beira, Maxixe, Maputo, Chimoio) and South Africa. Men are usually engaged in wage employment and women are married, but probably often engaged in informal sector vending. Because of the high degree of migration and absenteeism in the three southern provinces, the majority of the youth probably consider that their economic destiny is likely to be outside of their place of birth. However, many men are likely to return to what they feel is their homeland. Some would have already built their houses and developed their *machambas* during their absence, depending on their wives to maintain both. Others may return after long absences, starting a new life from scratch. Many of those who return would have developed skills or accumulated sufficient capital to start new economic activities such as transport, small shops, welding workshops, etc. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to get married and never come back. The unlikely prospects of economic development in these areas and the, as yet, limited prospects for the expansion of informal market trading, combined with slowly rising levels of education, are unlikely to induce young women to stay in their places of origin. And the likely prospect of moving away from their home areas is hardly conducive to young girls wanting to learn the skills of making *xirundzus*, the market for which is currently limited to a few parts of Mozambique.

Though it is common for younger generations to leave the households of southern Mozambique for economic or social reasons, a recent UNESCO report on Mozambican youth has shown that in many areas the youth are much less inclined to leave their zones of origin (de Vletter, 2000). In Morrumbala District (Zambezia Province), only about a quarter of the interviewed youth expressed a desire to leave their home areas in the future.

The village of Pembarra is an exception to most of the *xirundzu* making areas which are normally isolated and underdeveloped with little exposure to economic agents from outside the immediate area. Pembarra is a comparatively active crossroads economy with a mixture of informal markets, a petrol station, small eating *barracas*, overnight pensions, handicraft

sellers, etc. Despite the greater economic activity and the existence of intermediaries who re-sell baskets in Vilanculous, there does not appear to be a significant difference between Pembarra based basket producers and others from more remote areas. Although requiring more time to study, there is no evidence that the basket producers are exploiting their skills for serious income generating activities. It seems that *xirundzu* production may have been introduced during wartime as Pembarra expanded considerably due to an influx of war *deslocados*. These were resettled in well-planned *bairros* where we found many of the basket makers.

6. A socio-economic profile of basket makers

The poorest households of Mozambique rank amongst the poorest in the world. Households not benefiting from transfers from migrants in the *xirundzu* producing areas must rank amongst the poorest of the Mozambican poor. A poor subsistence household will typically have a mud hut with thatch, straw sleeping mats (*esteiras*), a cooking pot, a maize pounder (*pilao*), plates (with little or no cutlery), some agricultural tools (hoe, machete, etc.) and a minimum of clothing (*capulanas*). Some cash, rarely exceeding the equivalent of \$20, is saved in some households.

The poverty encountered amongst the older women abandoned by husbands and children is extreme. They talked of being constantly hungry and often had to resort to assistance from neighbours. Their houses are often badly made and they have to seek shelter from neighbours when it rains. Many of those encountered were frail, had sight problems and found it difficult to make baskets.

Some of the “homes” of *xirundzu* makers observed during our reconnaissance trip could only be described as shockingly poor. One hut had an air of complete abandonment. The hut itself could hardly provide any protection from rain or wind. There was absolutely no furniture, not even a mat to sleep on. A few broken *calabashes* were the only items that could have served as eating instruments. No clothes were evident. We were assured that this was the house of a very old woman who made *xirundzus* but who was out at her *machamba* during our visit.

The making of *xirundzus* is obviously one way in which women can protect themselves against total destitution. One woman explicitly stated that her mother effectively forced her to learn the craft of basket weaving as a means to protect herself “against hunger”. *Xirundzu* makers who are married often do not control the money that they earn from their baskets, giving the money they earned to their husbands. We also observed women without husbands handing over money to their sons.

Xixongue

Xixongue has the appearance of what might have been an *aldeia communal*, villages established in the early days of Independence to relocate dispersed peasants so that they could be more effectively served by social capital projects such as schools, health posts and water pumps. Xixongue has about 50 homesteads with about 300 residents. There are no commercial activities in the village apart from home-based activities. The nearest market is 15 km away in Mabote, the largest town in the area.

Seventeen women were interviewed in Xixongue. Of these seven (41 per cent) were over 50 and only four (24 per cent) were younger than 40 (most ages were estimated by the interviewer as most respondents did not know their age).

A majority (59 per cent) of basket makers were *de jure* household heads, of whom 70 per cent were widowed and 30 per cent abandoned. Seven of the respondents (41 per cent) were married, four of whom to polygamous husbands. All women had children, ranging from 1-8 with an average of 4 and a mode of 5. Only four still had children living with them; most children had left for other parts of Mozambique (in the case of most daughters to be married and the majority of sons to work, of whom at least half seem to have found their way to South Africa).

Most of the dead spouses or living husbands who abandoned the respondents had previously worked or are currently working in South Africa. Only two of the seven respondents who currently have husbands had migrant worker husbands. The remaining five husbands live in the Xixongue area with more than one wife.

Of the ten respondents who no longer had husbands supporting them, only half had some sort of support from absent children. In most cases the level of support was minimal. Of the 17 cases in Xixongue, five (29 per cent) had to rely entirely on their own resources for survival, though one lived with her daughter. Of these five, none pursued animal husbandry but three had another source of income (brewing traditional drinks) to supplement basket income.

The respondents felt that the younger female generation is more interested in informal sector trading (although still very nascent in many of these areas) than making and selling baskets. Many respondents felt that their daughters would not be interested in making baskets during the evening, the only time most basket makers devote to their skills. Only one respondent succeeded in passing on her skills to her daughter.

It is quite common for households to take care of the children of other family members. Amongst our respondents four (24 per cent) were taking care of children belonging mainly to absent sons or daughters. In all but one case, they received outside support.

The brewing of traditional drinks was the only other source of cash income in addition to basket making. In many cases the ingredients were limited to fruits of trees on their *machambas* (mainly cashew and coconuts). Nine (53 per cent) of the respondents supplemented their income in this way (most of the others did not because their Church forbade them doing so). The practice of *chitoco*, was mentioned in Pembarra and appeared to be a common source of income or food in the Limpopo valley but was not mentioned by the Xixongue respondents.

It can safely be said that all the respondents were poor. All of them lived in mud huts, except one whose migrant son in South Africa built a cement blockhouse. Apparently no one owned any distinguishing assets such as vehicles, solar panel generators, etc., though the interview was not designed to specifically seek out the existence of such assets. In these areas, the asset that is most likely to differentiate the level of wealth between one poor household and another is the number of animals being bred. For these households, the ownership of goats already puts them in the highest ranks. Only six (35 per cent) of the households claimed to breed some sort of animal, usually chickens, ducks and occasionally goats and pigs.

Many of the older women spoke of extreme isolation and loneliness. Some said that they had no friends. They had very little social life and virtually none had travelled any significant distances. Church is the only time that they leave the house (with the exception of work on *machamba*). The church has a strong influence on their lives: many, for example, do not make traditional drinks because of the Church.

Funhalouro

Funhalouro must rank as one of the most isolated and smallest district capitals in the country. It consists of a few government buildings, two shops and a small informal market of about ten *barracas* and about 30 women vendors selling food and a few basic consumer items. It is separated by about 110 km of dirt road from Massinga to the east and about the same distance from Mabote to the north by a road which disappears into little more than a cow track, traversed by *chapa* twice a week. Funhalouro is surrounded by settlements of homesteads and *machambas*, with one area being populated essentially by people from Gaza, many of whom come from the *xirundzu* producing area of Kubu.

In contrast to Xixongue, where most of the respondents were without husband, most respondents in Funhalouro were married to polygamous husbands. In one case the husband had seven wives. The case of polygamous wives is quite interesting as they are in many ways mid-way between *de jure* household heads and wives with resident husbands. In Funhalouro the respondents spoke of having greater control over money than the wife of a monogamous husband. One said that she had full control over her earnings but that she would set aside some money for “drinking”. Polygamous husbands in the Funhalouro area seemed to prefer having wives living in different homesteads. In one case, the husband maintained another wife in Gaza Province. Polygamy is also the consequence of the safety net system whereby a brother of a deceased husband is obliged to take on the widow as his wife. In one case a very young man had three wives, two of whom were widows of dead brothers and were considerably older than their new husband.

Virtually all respondents were pessimistic about the demand for *xirundzus*, feeling that future demand was being negatively affected by plastic basins and buckets. Many were demoralised about the declining demand for their product. The only reason why the substitution has not been faster was because of the long distance between Funhalouro and Massinga (a return journey costing 40,000 Mt, or about \$2.50) which made the acquisition of substitutes relatively expensive.

Interviews in Funhalouro highlighted the plight of very poor households and child mortality. Several women who reported large numbers of births claimed that about half of their children died. Reference was made to the famine years of the early 1980s when many children were reported to have lost their lives.

Pembarra

Pembarra, situated at the crossroads of the EN1 and the turn-off to Vilanculos, is much more exposed to the modern economy than Funhalouro or Xixongue. With passing trade, women are much more likely to be involved in informal vending. Productive non-farm activities include the sale of building poles (cut from the bush), reeds, thatch, traditional drinks, sleeping mats, wood barrels, *piloes*, wood kitchen utensils, etc. The production and marketing of *xirundzus* also seemed to be affected. Women spoke of making up to five *xirundzus* per

month (partly due to the fact that they were smaller, but also because there appeared to be much more active trading in baskets). During our visit, the local community head came up to us to sell six *xirundzus* that he had bought from the producers for resale.

Several indicators observed in Pembarra suggest that conditions for basket weaving are much better for a *natural* internal market. Respondents said that the demand for *xirundzus* was high and one respondent had four of her school-going daughters producing *xirundzus*.

7. Recognising the potential of the *xirundzu* as a poverty reduction strategy

The economics surrounding the production of *xirundzu* baskets is full of ironies and paradoxes. These baskets are almost identical, if not of superior quality to baskets produced in Botswana which have generated a multi-million dollar export business and are recognised the world over, fetching inflated prices. *Xirundzus* by sorry contrast have received virtually no commercial interest from outside of the immediate production zones and now are seriously threatened with extinction as the old women who make them pass away, unable to transmit these skills to uninterested daughters. As bright, durable and cheap plastic buckets made with Western technology find their way into *xirundzu* producing areas, the only salvation for these baskets lies in exporting them to developed countries where there is a demand for traditionally made craft such as *xirundzus* (and particularly *xirundzus* because they are made exclusively for traditional purposes). Although *xirundzus* have provided their impoverished producers with small amounts of cash, *xirundzu* production does not provide households with safety-net income during poor agricultural seasons. As production is almost entirely dependent on local demand, the vagaries of the local economy are reflected immediately in the demand for *xirundzus*, subordinated to food purchases when subsistence production is low.

There are several compelling reasons why the external commercialisation of *xirundzu* baskets should receive urgent attention:

- Producers of *xirundzus* are progressively becoming impoverished as returns to their unit of labour decrease; alternative forms of income generation are not taken up because basket making is the only activity with which these women feel comfortable;
- The *xirundzu* market has to date been almost entirely locally based resulting in limited demand, which is reduced further in bad agricultural years; it does not provide a safety-net alternative source of income;
- As modern, more durable and cheaper substitutes such as plastic buckets penetrate these remote areas, the demand for *xirundzus* will decline;
- Unless external markets are found, *xirundzus* will inevitably disappear;
- Given the success of similar products elsewhere (Botswana, KwaZulu/Natal and Zimbabwe), there is no reason why similar success could not be achieved for *xirundzus* which enjoy two distinct advantages: they are highly price competitive and, so far, are being produced for purely traditional purposes and can be considered collectors pieces;
- With sufficient price incentives and proof of consistent demand, it should be possible to stimulate *xirundzu* production by existing producers as it can be given a higher priority in the household economy;
- As the market for *xirundzus* expands and the returns per unit of labour increase, it is likely that the skills will be more readily passed down to daughters;

- The well managed commercialisation of *xirundzus* is likely to be one of the most effective ways of reducing poverty in these zones for two main reasons: first, the region has a comparative advantage in the existence of special skills which can be endogenously transmitted with minimal outside intervention (no capital is needed to develop skills) and, secondly, demand will be expanded to a very broad international market;
- *Xirundzu* making is an important part of the national cultural patrimony and should be preserved; and
- One of the strongest arguments, at least for Government support, is the huge potential of *xirundzus* for generating export revenues.

8. Recommendations

The *xirundzu* baskets of Inhambane (and parts of Gaza) must rate as some of the finest in southern Africa, rivalling those of Botswana (same techniques) and KwaZulu which have captured a significant niche in the international craft market at very high prices.¹ To successfully transform the dying production of *xirundzus* into a buoyant cottage industry, three essential steps are required:

- to develop a production methodology that results in reliable supply volumes with adequate standards of quality;
- to create a market for *xirundzus* that will result in regular orders of sufficient volume at prices yielding acceptable returns; and
- to create an effective means of intermediation that will ensure regular purchase from the producers and reliable delivery to the overseas market.

These steps are interdependent and cannot be undertaken independently of one another. They imply that, to get the process launched, critical stakeholders will have to enter into this venture with vision and be prepared to take risk.

Production methodology

Women currently make baskets on an intermittent basis from their dispersed households during free time. To get women to commit themselves to basket production will require a more constant (and possibly higher) return per unit of labour. The principal opportunity cost would be production from their *machamba* to which most peasants have been conditioned to give absolute priority, because, in most years, their land produces most of the family's food needs. It is not advisable to disrupt time devoted to food production but it may be possible to reduce the time allocated to other activities in the afternoons so as to allow for more time for basket making. All respondents said that they would spend more time on their baskets if more regular income could be secured. For obvious economic reasons *xirundzus* will have to be organised into pickup points to justify collection trips. Furthermore, production must be correctly attributed to the individual producers to ascertain due payments. Finally, each producing area will require some form of area-based supervision. Some form of association could perhaps be created in each selected area with a committee responsible for storage, collection, quality control, payments and liaison with commercial intermediaries.

¹ In the 2001 calendar of the American NGO Aid to Artisans (ATA) the *xirundzu* baskets were featured photographically as backdrops for two of the 12 pages.

Marketing and sales

The critical requirement for success is sufficient ongoing external demand. This will depend very much on interior decorating trends and the possibilities for penetrating the market for well-established basket producers such as those of Botswana, KwaZulu and Zimbabwe. Though the baskets may be of equal beauty and quality, consumer loyalty to certain regions and commercial contacts may be difficult to change. The big plus the *xirundzus* have at this stage is a definite cost advantage over Botswana and KwaZulu for the type of product sold. Aggressive marketing initiatives will be necessary in order to open up possibilities. *Xirundzu* baskets shown to potential retailers in the USA, Canada, Holland, Switzerland and South Africa have elicited very positive reactions. In Mozambique, the new Holiday Inn Hotel recently ordered 330 baskets to decorate the rooms, and in South Africa both retail shops and interior decorators appear interested in buying the baskets.

Xirundzu baskets are currently produced exclusively for traditional purposes and such baskets have an important psychological appeal to certain consumers who are willing to pay extra for such craft. As production increases and is directed only at overseas market, the appeal of *xirundzus* is likely to diminish, especially as the basket becomes more commonly available. Though it is important to always maintain some production following traditional designs, especially amongst current producers, diversification away from the basic products was an important strategic move by those involved in the trade in Botswana and KwaZulu. In these cases, women were encouraged to be creative and experiment with variations of both traditional and non-traditional designs. This approach proved to be very successful.

Commercial intermediation

Commercial intermediation would require considerable investment to set up the necessary structures and cover the commercial risk of purchasing and selling the *xirundzus*. It may be that donors and government would regard the provision of seed capital for preparing the right conditions for production as an excellent opportunity for establishing an income generating project for poor women.² More importantly, this skill should be promoted as a sustainable way of earning a livelihood for subsequent generations. With private sector commitment, development assistance of this nature would have a much greater chance of succeeding than standard income promoting projects such as the production of school uniforms, ceramics, etc., where new skills are introduced without much concern about commercialisation and other critical linkages.

Creating the right conditions for production would involve further research to identify approximately how many producers there are and where they are located. Then a survey of how many would be interested in producing baskets on a commercial basis and on what terms would be necessary. Initially a few pilot focal points could be identified where associations could be established. Production codes would need to be set such as price indicators according to size, design, quality, colour, etc. Training would be a prerequisite for the association committee members for basic management skills, and most important of all,

² The firm *Shanty Craft*, owned by the author, has entered into the realm of commercialisation of *xirundzus* on a very small scale. It currently employs a young Mozambican man, who originally helped us to locate the producers, as an agent to maintain constant contact with producers, collect finished baskets and control quality. Every second month or so he travels by bus from the producing areas to deliver baskets to Maputo. A small experimental association of producers has been established in Xixongue.

training of new basket makers would have to start at an early stage to see how responsive younger women are to taking up these traditional skills.

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