

Potential of Sustaining Handicrafts as a Tourism Product in Jordan

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Abstract

Handicrafts form an integral part of tourist experience, they represent local traditions and indigenous populations, also a valuable souvenir. Many countries benefit from handicrafts as a part of the cultural tourism dominated by archaeological and heritage sites, since they provide communities with a source of income and jobs opportunities, such benefit varies though from a country to another. For Jordan, the handicraft sector is performing at a level far below its potential as a tourism product, this paper aims at exploring the reasons behind such weak performance; development aspects, strengths and weaknesses were explored, different implications were suggested to improve the contribution of handicrafts to Jordanian tourism.

Keywords: Handicrafts, Cultural Tourism, Sustainable Tourism Development, Jordan.

Introduction

When culture is defined from a touristic perspective, a special focus is given to communities and their social characteristics, traditions and behaviors; which all make them different. This focus is given to their representation of creativity and artistic aspects in their cultural complex. The desire by tourists to encounter and experience different cultures as well as their materials and immaterial expressions are strong motivations behind the enormous growth of heritage tourism taking place worldwide (Robinson and Picard 2006). Cultural/ Heritage tourism is based on the existence of some components; these are classified as tangible and intangible. The tangible part includes both immobile resources (as built heritage, sites and cultural landscapes) and movable elements (as artifacts, handicrafts, media and consumer goods), the intangible group of cultural aspects as art expressions, languages, living cultures, folklore...etc) (Ratanakomut 2006). Tangible and intangible components of heritage are the main attractions of both domestic and international tourists since they satisfy the curiosity and relaxation to a learning experience and appreciation of local cultures (both tangible and intangible) (Bak 2008).

Tangible and intangible cultural heritage together express the richness and diversity of the world's cultural traditions. In tourism, visiting different cultural sites is considered as the main heritage attraction, while intangible cultural heritage often is viewed as secondary to the experience in such sites. Many tourists would stop at a store or workshop selling traditional handicraft items (UNESCO and EIIHCAP 2008). An integral part of tourist experience is "Handicrafts", they represent local traditions and indigenous populations, they also symbolize the places visited by tourists, the experiences they had, and a souvenir to be taken for friends and relatives (Akhal et al 2008). Besides evoking wonderful memories by tourists when taking a good quality handicraft home, it arouses the interest of others who see it to visit the destination (WTO 2008). Handcrafted objects as tangible components and craftsmanship as being intangible in culture are among the resources mobilized in tourism. Exploiting these resources for tourism purposes is of a great significance to sustainable development. Such significance comes from the fact that manufacturing traditional artistic objects generates both income and employment opportunities.

Moreover, such objects are one of the means through which a community presents its values and spiritualities; and not less important, they form a vital part from the social and cultural identity transmitted through generations (Robinson and Picard 2006). Such benefits of handicrafts are to be seen in countries depending on tourism as a vital economic sector. For Jordan, tourism is forming 14% of total GDP, it is the Kingdom's largest export sector, second largest private sector employer, and second highest producer of foreign exchange. Jordan is a destination with many iconic tourist attractions, such as Petra, Wadi Rum, and the Dead Sea. Yet despite its advantage and its importance to the economy, Jordan's tourism sector is performing at a level far below its potential (which also applies to handicrafts as will be explained in following sections of the paper).

To achieve reasonable growth in the tourism sector that will in turn contribute to economic development and job creation, Jordan needs to make a significant investment of funds and efforts. Jordan must focus on attracting high-yield visitors, developing niche products, enhancing the visitor experience, increasing international marketing, and improving infrastructure and the regulatory environment.

Jordan's National Tourism Strategy 2004-2010 outlines the steps for doubling the Kingdom's tourism economy by 2010 using an integrated value-chain approach involving government facilitation and investment in partnership with the private sector. The strategy targeted the following priority niche markets: cultural/heritage (archaeology), religious, eco-tourism, health and wellness, adventure, MICE (Meetings, incentives, conferences, and events) and Cruising. Among these types of tourism, Jordan depends heavily on taking tourists to cultural/heritage sites since they form the largest portion of tourist attractions; attending cultural events and visiting museums are usually integral parts of tourist experience. Unfortunately, handicrafts are not playing the same significant role. This paper aims at exploring the reasons behind the weak performance of handicrafts sector as part of cultural tourism in Jordan, and the potential to improve their contribution to sustainable development; though, a clear background should be given about handicrafts in Jordan as a tourism product.

Handicrafts Sector in Jordan

Jordan is country that is rich in its cultural heritage of archaeological/historical sites, performances, festivals, handicrafts and other cultural resources. In regard to craftsmanship, these are so many and diverse, although of their weak presence as part of the Jordanian tourism product, these include: traditional textile, embroidery, metallic work, stone carved pieces, wood, carving on wood, carving on copper and white metals, pottery and ceramics, manual forming of glass, sheep wool, straw/ basketry, sand bottles, mother of shells, leather, jewelry and precious stones, holy water bottles, mosaic, making traditional musical instruments, swords and daggers, manually made carpets and mats, traditional costumes and some other material. The following is a brief description for the most distinguished and still widely produced among these handicrafts:

- Weaving: this technique is used to produce pieces made of sheep wool; after shaving the sheep, the raw material is to be washed, carded and spun to form yarns, then dyed and attached to looms to create carpets, cushions, wall-hangings and saddle bags. Some Bedouin tribes in central and southern parts of Jordan are enrolled in projects to produce such handcrafted pieces (e.g. Bani Hamida Project) (Plate 1).
- Embroidery: the cross stitch is usually used to decorate dresses, shawls, cushions, bags and furniture. Different colors and designs are put into combinations for such purpose. Each region in the country has its own designs and colors.
- Handmade glass: green and blue vessels are made by blowing raw glass.
- Mosaics: such pieces are made in the same old technique; mosaic pieces of ceramic, glass or stone are to be cut with hammer, tile cutter and tile nippers. These pieces are then put into design and attached with an adhesive material. Madaba Mosaic School is responsible of training individuals who are specialized in old mosaics restoration and making copies of original mosaics (Plate 2).



Plate 1: Weaved rugs by women of Bani Hamida Project, Jordan

Source: (<http://www.tarabradford.com/2010/02/bani-hamida.html>). Retrieved on: 06 January 2011)



Plate 2: A mosaic piece made by a local in a shop located at Madaba, Jordan

- Sand bottles: bottles of different shapes are to be filled with layers of colored sand, different shapes and designs as animals, floral and geometric elements are used (Plate 3).
- Ceramics: this product is based on creating different vessels' forms from earth ware, these vessels can be plain, glazed or even decorated with mosaics tiles.



Plate 3: Sand bottles in Petra, Jordan

Throughout Jordan, regardless of the area of craftsmanship, artisans tend to produce the same products with the same designs; they are not encouraged by clients or any stakeholders to produce unique handcrafted items. Not so much was done to associate products with specific regions, producers, or cultural heritage, only few exceptions are to be seen; these include sand bottles made in Petra and Aqaba, the mosaic tiles made in Madaba, products made by the Jordan River Foundation (JRF), Noor Al Hussein Foundation (NHF), Jordan Hashemite Fund for Development (JOHUD) and the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) as jewelry and handcrafts soaps, jams and herbs found at specific locations as the Dana Nature Reserve (in southern parts of Jordan) (Akhal et al 2008).

Formal Bodies Responsible for Handicrafts Sector in Jordan

The development of this sector is the responsibility of different bodies, there is no definite official body that is responsible for developing crafts in Jordan. There are four ministries that had a vital role in supporting crafts programs; these are: Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Ministry of Social Development. These ministries, especially Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, have a vital role in managing, developing and marketing such products. The ministry issued 2 legislations to regulate the development of this sector; these are Legislations 36/2000 and 38/2000; according to former legislation, the handicraft business is a job based on manually transforming the raw material into a fully or partially handcrafted piece. It involves two types of work: the production of the handicraft and selling it. There are some required conditions to get a license to operate a handicraft shop; these are: having an ownership for the shop, having no criminal history record, and a Bank mortgage of 500 JD (1 JD = 1.40944 US \$) renewed on regular bases.

The licensed shop should commit to some procedures while operating, these include putting the license in a visible place, putting a sign for the name of the shop in both Arabic and English, putting a "Made in Jordan" tag on each piece made locally, putting the price on pieces to be sold, giving the customer a receipt for all bought items and their values, assuring the good quality of goods and attractive presentation of them, giving a concern in sustaining Jordanian heritage and handicraft, having Jordanian goods in the shop should not be less than 70%; imported goods should be put in an isolated section with being marked in terms of their producing country, and avoiding kickback payment. Till June 2010, 296 souvenir tourist shops are registered in the Statistics Department of Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in Jordan, 816 employees work in these shops which are selling different handicrafts and souvenirs.

According to Akhal et al (2008), there are two associations that cooperate with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities to regulate and supervise the performance of handicrafts sector; these are: the Jordan Handicrafts Traders Association (JHTA) which is registered under the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA), it is the official body for licensing handicrafts producers and traders (factories, stores, or artisans) in cooperation with MOTA, and the Jordan Handicrafts Producers Association (JHPA) which is registered under the Ministry of Culture, it provides a number of services to its members, including help in marketing through pushing official entities to purchase giveaways from producers and through participating in national, regional and international exhibitions, as well as providing training courses in handicrafts and nomination of its members to attend international training courses. Unfortunately, these associations are not providing significant support to their members in production or marketing. There is also the Jordanian Society of Traditional Handicrafts, which is responsible for the following duties as it states in Legislation 38/2000: assuring the rights of its members (health and social), giving a concern in the development and reputation of national tourism, participating in tourism research and studies, also events and workshops relevant to tourism, participating in tourism training and development, gathering information and statistics related to handicrafts and supplying MOTA with them, putting codes of ethics and regulation of the service; also participating in environment protection.

There are also some NGO's that have played a major role in developing this sector in Jordan by initiating income-generating projects in rural areas, they are taking two roles, of which one is to help generate income and employment, and the second is to act as entrepreneurs. These are:

- Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature: The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) is an NGO responsible for conserving wildlife and natural habitats, also contributing to community based development, this could be seen in several initiatives that have successfully marketed and sold handcrafted silver jewelry, organic jams and fruit leathers, soaps, painted ostrich eggs, sandblasted frames, environmental board games, and goat leather nature boxes. These are made by women in Dana and Mujib areas (<http://www.rscn.org.jo/orgsite/RSCN/ShoppingforNature/tabid/61/language/en-US/default.aspx>, 06 January 2011).
- Noor Al Hussein Foundation: The Noor al Hussein Foundation (NHF) is an NGO that works on a variety of different Programs as handicraft development. The peak of productivity was in the '80s and '90s (<http://www.nooralhusseinfoundation.org/>).
- Jordan River Foundation: The Jordan River Foundation (JRF) was established to initiate socioeconomic projects for women and to provide employment opportunities by developing their knowledge and skills in handicraft production and entrepreneurship (<http://www.jordanriver.jo/>).
- Jordan Hashemite Fund for Development: The Jordan Hashemite Fund for Development (JOHUD) has a network of more than 50 Community Development Centers that are providing a mixture of services to entrepreneurs in design, business training, and credit access (<http://www.johud.org.jo/>).

Unfortunately, there is no unified strategy that coordinates the efforts of these previously mentioned bodies, which are all competing for the same funds and duplicating efforts. These societies are facing different obstacles as finding outlets for selling their products. There are also some projects that were funded and supported by external organizations as the European Union and USAID, these have also invested in handicraft programs in Jordan without a comprehensive plan. Currently the Government of Jordan with funds from USAID has invested resources in handicraft linkages to tourism in Karak, Irbid, Madaba, Petra, and Wadi Rum. The European Union did a Tourism Marketing Strategy for Aqaba through 2010, but failed to link handicraft development as a key area to be developed.

Some local foundations had also a significant role in involving rural communities in the production of handicrafts; such as the Ghor al Safi Women's Group, the Women's Trade Cooperation at Salt, the Iraq al Amir Women's Cooperative Society and many others.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Jordanian Handicrafts Sector

A great concern should be given to handicrafts as tourism products since they provide a big number of locals with job opportunities and income, and so alleviating poverty among indigenous populations in Jordan. This is supported by the fact that most of handcrafted pieces require locally available materials and simple technology, also a small amount of capital investment; moreover, such production process should not necessarily be conducted in urban centers, actually it can be placed in any rural area or even at homes. Availability of natural raw materials with having unemployed and underemployed women interested in training and production, besides the expected prosperity in tourism for next years, growing international interest in handicraft products, particularly handmade items by local women using local natural products and paid fair wages; all are some of the strengths supporting the limited development of handicrafts in Jordan (Gorman et al 2009).

Another important factor is that tourists' shops are scattered all over the country, mostly around and inside different sites visited by tourists. That is in addition to the great variation in handicrafts, which requires then significant numbers of artisans to produce such items. Despite such advantages, some problems are facing the handicrafts sector in Jordan; as stated in Jordan Tourism National Strategy (2004-2010), these are: the lack of a comprehensive plan that unifies the efforts of different stakeholders involved in the development of such sector (which is clarified in previous sections in the article), the lack of certification and branding of Jordanian-made pieces under specific criteria (social and economic criteria), not having a research center to guide artists in designing handicrafts and the lack of promotional activities abroad and within the country to introduce the product to both domestic and international tourism markets. Regarding the competition between the Jordanian product and the imported crafts, a major problem can be witnessed; in addition to not having a central location to purchase local handicrafts, these several stores import pieces in bulk from India, Pakistan, Egypt, China, or other Middle East countries (Plate 4). For example: mother of pearl inlet furniture and accessories from Syria, hammered trays with arabesque designs from Lebanon, pashmina shawls and scarves, inexpensive rayon and cotton dresses from India cheap shells, jewelry, clothing and toys from China; and Jewelry from Yemen. There is an unfair competitiveness of local products against imported souvenirs which are present in more quantities, also these are to be sold with lower prices if compared to local ones. The high prices of local handicrafts is another issue, this is resulted by casual and low volume production, poor management and lack of proper costing skills (Akhal et al 2008).

Although Legislation (36/2002) of MOTA states in article 9 the actions to be taken by owners of these shops, full commitment is not always the case; there is a violation by most of them when it comes to putting a "Made in Jordan" tag on each piece made locally, putting the prices on goods, having Jordanian goods in the shop not to be less than 70% of total pieces; and putting imported goods in an isolated section with being marked in terms of their producing country. This reflects either the unawareness by shops owners about these legislations, or lack of supervision on implementing these legislations.



Plate 4: A stand of souvenirs at the site of Petra, most of the pieces are imported ones (camel bone figurines, ornaments, alabaster eggs, metallic boxes decorated with semi-precious stones)

Other major challenges noticed by the author are the lack of data and information concerning some vital indicators of products characteristics, manufacturers and traders activities and profiles, consumers and markets segments and profiles (market analyses), training as well as other aspects concerning this sector. Also, lack of publications and interpretation in regard to: the objects categories, their characteristics and evolution, their symbolic and cultural meanings, and their significance to the heritage and culture of the country. That is in addition to the absence of presenting the cultural differences among country's regions when producing these pieces. Each region or governorate in Jordan has its own uniqueness in regard to cultural daily life aspects, and a special influence of surrounding environment on its different forms of art. Presenting the identity and uniqueness of the region in artistic pieces is important to sustain the varied traditions of the country and its communities. Not less important to previous problems, is the shortage of interpretational material combining the sold handcrafted pieces.

For promotional aspect; by looking at different guide books and web pages presenting information about tourism attractions in Jordan, it can be noticed that not so much is mentioned about handicrafts, even in the Jordanian formal websites. Despite the existence of several handicraft stores, they are not listed in all of the travel guidebooks. The situation becomes worse if we consider that some taxi drivers and tour guides steer tourists away from galleries and workshops featuring Jordanian products; which is justified by higher commission rates offered by merchants and traders usually carrying imported commodities. Moreover, the imported cheap handicrafts are passed off as Jordanian, which misleads tourists' perception of the quality and refinement traditionally displayed.

Another issue is that travelers to Jordan only spend one or two nights before moving on to Egypt or Israel; therefore, having a full schedule full of visits to important tourist sites, tourists have very little time to navigate between different boutiques, galleries and showrooms (Jordan Business 02 October 2007).

There are some other critical issues related to handicrafts as a tourism product in Jordan; one of these is the inappropriate spatial characteristics of shops and stands located around and inside archaeological sites. In Petra for example, many of the stands located inside the archaeological site are made of materials that does not fit the appearance of the site (plastic sheets covering wooden beams and roofs to create a shelter), most of these materials are also in a bad condition (torn cloth and spotted wood boards) (Plate 5); another serious issue is the littering caused by the trash thrown by workers of these shops in nearby areas.



Plate 5: A small stand in the archaeological site of Petra where sand bottles are made

Discussion and Conclusions

Buying quality souvenirs in a country is one of the key factors in achieving satisfaction and fulfillment of visitors, which creates a great potential for communities to utilize from selling handcrafted material to achieve economic viability. Unfortunately, such benefit is combined with the fact that linkage between handicrafts and souvenirs is not well defined in many tourist destinations; this severely affects the ability of local communities to earn profits as well as promoting their culture and its uniqueness (Robinson and Picard 2006). This applies to Jordan since most of the handcrafted materials sold to tourists are imported ones. There is an urgent need to support local handicrafts in terms of production and marketing; this can be achieved by providing small and medium projects of local communities with needed finances and training to assure better quality and quantity of handicrafts for both local and tourist markets.

This can help local communities in rural areas in Jordan to benefit from handicrafts as a provider of income and job opportunity. According to Mikkelsen (1999), technical assistance can be given through improving technology used in producing these pieces, also developing the product by introducing new designs, selecting and providing required quality of raw material, this material should be bought in bulk and provided in advance. Quality standards should be set before production by involved authorities, as well as ways to present final products in a uniform and attractive manner. This should be followed by studies and research to understand the markets and identify new buyers, also efforts to participate in trade fairs to promote the product.

Very few examples of good manufacturing and presentation of handicrafts can be seen in Jordan, such as those galleries that belong to projects of Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (e.g. Dana Reserve Project in south of Jordan and Wild Jordan in Amman), where products of local communities are shown in an attractive manner. Working with communities on the sensitive presentation and promotion of handicrafts and related cultural aspects is an essential part in empowering the sector. This can be achieved by a number of procedures; these are: developing interpretative programs and events based on the heritage and distinctiveness of the area, conceiving creative, sensitive and viable visitor attractions where local culture and traditions can be showcased; incorporating aspects of local cultural heritage and distinctiveness into various elements of visitor experience, such as furnishing in tourism establishments, local cuisine in restaurants, traditional designs in architecture, and art and sculpture in public spaces; and capacity building with local communities regarding visitor interpretation and issues of quality and authenticity (WTO & UNEP 2005).

Another vital implication is working with tourism services' providers as outlets for these productions. Most of 4 and 5 star hotels in Jordan include shops for selling both local and imported handicrafts; this is not to be seen in other hotel rates. As Tapper & Font (2004) state, large hotels have developed programs to encourage local production at the standards they require, but for small hotels, these are more likely to buy from local suppliers, which will then help in improving the contribution of tourism as a provider of employments as well as preserving local skills in craft production, the same applies to tour operators who have the ability to use local food and crafts as tourist attractions of their packages. Tour operators can have a great role in educating their customers about local food and crafts through interpretive methods. This initiates the need for capacity building and creating networks by the Jordanian government through the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities to ease the coordination among producers of handicrafts and such tourism services to better market and sell them.

There are some other implications to enhance the performance of handicraft sector in Jordan; such as increasing the awareness of the handicrafts' manufacturers and traders in Jordan about the legislations of this industry. This will make them more committed to make most of the products in their shops to be locally made, also tagging their products with the country of origin; this should be followed with supervision from concerned authorities. Also, increasing the awareness about handicrafts through interpretational material (books, booklets, brochures, movies, post cards, and other means of interpretation), and through creating events to disseminate the knowledge about the product.

To enhance the performance of the sector, there is a necessity to establish a full database for the industry of handicrafts in Jordan; such database should include the following information: properties of manufacturing and selling center (ownership, sources of finance, types of products, techniques used in manufacturing, sources of material, training given to staff, distribution of products, prices... etc); profiles of workers in this sector; market information: (profiles of consumers: mainly their nationalities and if that relates to buying some specific products as well as to issues related to consumer behavior), this should help manufacturers and traders to have a better performance. Not less important to previously mentioned procedures is compiling information about handicrafts in Jordan as a mean of documentation of this heritage: (products types, geographical distribution, aspects of uniqueness among different regions and governorates in the country, material and its sources, manufacturing techniques, cultural and symbolic aspects of these products, evolution and changes that might took place on these products...etc). That is in addition to creating an interpretational material to go with each product to increase the awareness of consumers about its cultural significance.

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