



Trash or Treasure! Opportunities and Challenges for Artisan Enterprise from Recycled Waste

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Scavenging, or informal recycling, represents a significant global economic activity (Medina, 2007) allowing certain groups to survive while providing raw materials to various industries including agriculture, housing, industry, and artisan enterprise. In developing areas, artisans use scavenged raw materials to create a wide variety of products including pottery, sandals, lamps, fashion accessories, and textiles. This paper uses two cases in Guatemala as evidence of the informal recycling system.

Background and Theoretical Perspective: The informal recycling sector is an unregistered labor-intensive sector characterized as small scale and low-technology. The skill and subsequent economic outcome of scavenging comes from foragers recognizing the value of various forms of waste. Medina (2007) estimated that the economic impact of scavenging is “hundreds of millions of dollars per year” (p. 252) providing millions of jobs worldwide. In fact, when properly supported, scavenging provides sustainable opportunities by creating jobs, reducing poverty, decreasing pollution, conserving natural resources, and supplying low-cost raw materials to industry. Scavengers are often thought to be among the poorest in the world, yet there is clear evidence that they are not always poor and they play an important role in supplying raw materials to various industries including artisans.

Our research focuses on Guatemalan women who participate in informal waste scavenging in order to produce their textile craft. This research is guided by Medina’s work on waste recycling as an informal activity. Medina, a leading scholar on world scavenging, outlines four types of scavenging activities: (1) *scavenging for self-consumption*, (2) *industrial scavenging*, (3) *scavenging for artisan activities*, and (4) *scavenging for agricultural activities*. Medina’s framework reveals how participation in scavenging activities can assist in transitional change with social and economic benefits (Medina, 2007).

Method: We conducted case studies of two projects carried out by Guatemalan artisan groups that used scavenged recycled materials. In Project #1, artisans wove strips cut from plastic bags into placemats and other household products for export. In Project #2 artisans hooked rugs for the U.S. market from used clothing purchased at the *pacas*. In addition, both projects were introduced by outsiders. The first by an internationally recognized artist, MaryAnn Wise, who guided Guatemalan women through the rug hooking process. Project #2 was led by Deborah Chandler, a US-based founder of Mayan Hands who recognized the growing consumer focus on

recycling and sustainability. Data were collected in Guatemala through participant observation, interviews with artisans and organizational leaders, photo documentation of production processes and finished products, and by participation in an exhibition and accompanying lecture by Guatemalan rug hookers who traveled to the U.S. Data were analyzed through constant comparison, and resolution of themes, issues, and challenges emerging from the data.

Findings: Historically, Guatemalan women have participated in backstrap weaving as a sustainable enterprise that contributes significantly to family income. When cotton commodity prices saw radical increases in 2010, the women were faced with the challenge of acquiring affordable raw materials. As a result, the recovery of materials from waste became an important survival strategy for the artisans. Throughout Guatemala, the rural landscape is scattered with pink, green, orange, yellow and turquoise plastic waste. In the first project, plastic bags, when cleaned and cut into strips offered a readily available cotton yarn substitute. Scavenged plastic allowed women to continue their weaving, develop new household products, empower their imagination, and contribute to the spirit of community by providing inexpensive raw materials at a time when the cost of traditional cotton yarns was prohibitive. Even after cotton prices fell in late 2011, the Guatemalan women continued making products from recycled materials.

For the second example, in second hand clothing shops called *pacas*, Maya women forage through piles of used clothing arriving from US charity organizations and commercial rag sorters. When cut into strips, the used clothing serves as the raw material for making latch-hook rugs that feature long-used Maya designs. Together, the plastic bags and rags that are scavenged offer new opportunities for Guatemalan weavers who must have cheap raw materials to sustain their craft enterprises. However, artisans in both projects also face challenges including finding sufficient plastic waste to achieve production capacity for export orders and locating used clothing in colors, textures, and weights to meet U.S. aesthetic and quality demand.

The skills acquired by the artisans while weaving with scavenged plastic bags and rug hooking with old clothes clearly fall under two scavenger types outlined by Medina (2007): *scavenging for self-consumption* and *scavenging for artisan activities*. Ultimately, women artisans are able to continue their economic activity while maintaining family and community attachment. Even though informal waste management may not be a development goal *per se*, waste scavengers play an important role in waste reduction and therefore should be encouraged through economic activities that lead to an increased amount of solid waste usage.

References

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