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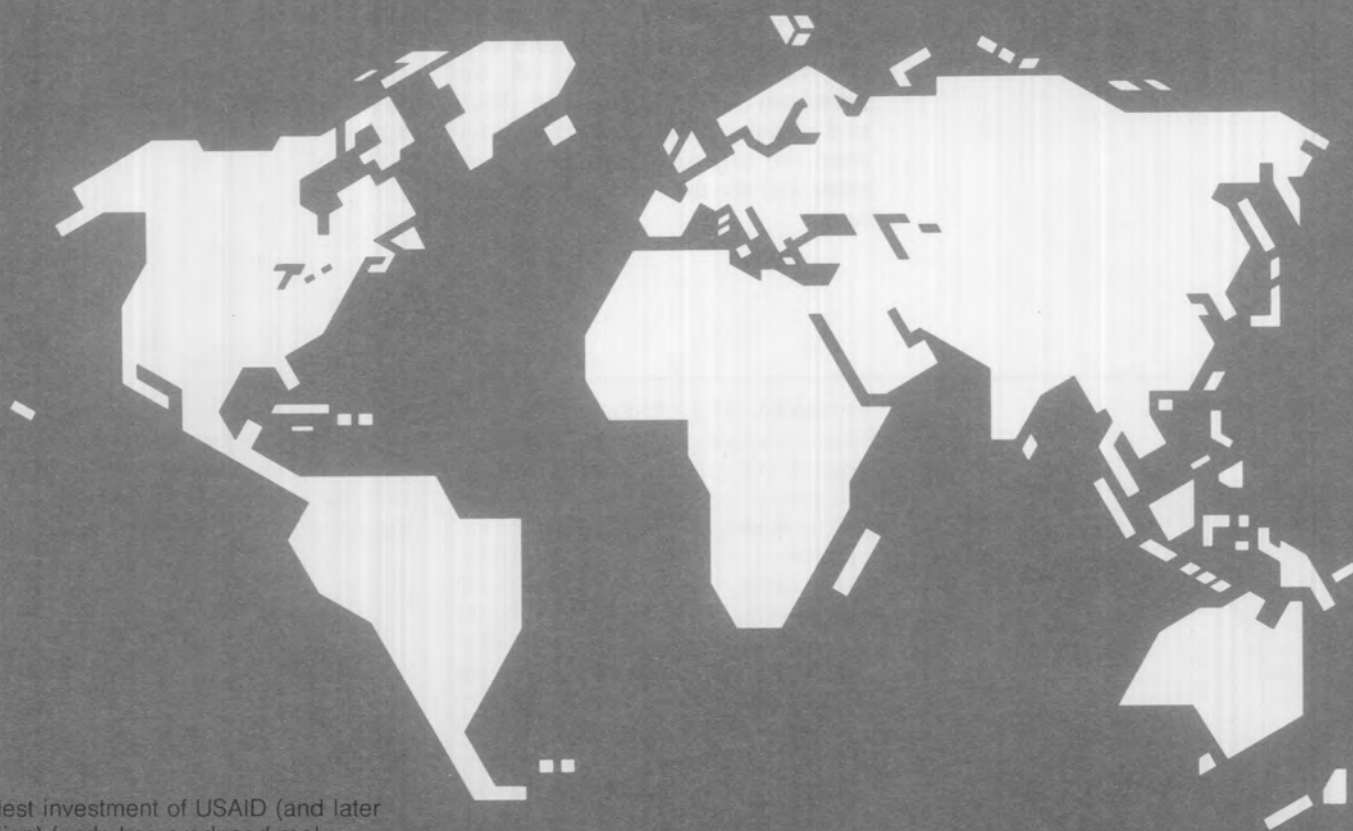
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Reports

THE SIERRA LEONE ARTS AND CRAFTS COOPERATIVE

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



A modest investment of USAID (and later Canadian) funds has produced real economic benefits for artisans and craftsmen, principally those involved in the *gara* industry.

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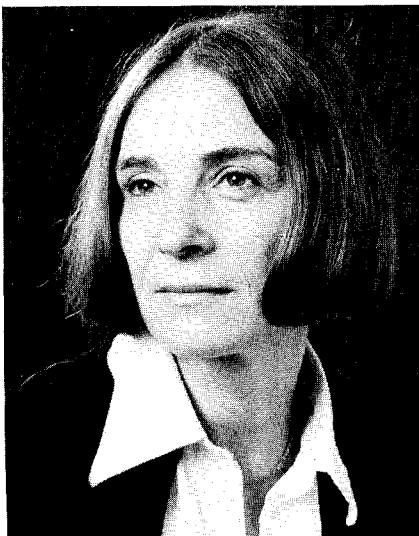
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THE AUTHOR



BARBARA E. HARRELL-BOND is a social anthropologist who has conducted research in England and in West Africa. Her special interests are family, urban problems, law, and the history of the imposition of alien law in colonial Africa. She received a B. Litt. and D. Phil. in anthropology from the University of Oxford. Her publications include *Modern Marriage in Sierra Leone: A Study of the Professional Group* and *Community Leadership and the Transformation of Freetown (1801-1976)*, the latter being co-researched and written with two historians, Dr. Allan Howard and Dr. David Skinner. She has also published widely in academic journals, lectured in a number of universities including the University of Illinois (Urbana), the University of Helsinki, and the University of Warsaw, and was a Visiting Scholar at

the Afrika-Studiecentrum, Leiden. Appointed a Senior Research Fellow at the School of Law, University of Warwick, in 1976, Dr. Harrell-Bond joined the Field Staff in 1978 to report on West Africa.

This *Report* describes the Sierra Leone Arts and Crafts Cooperative, a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Although all donor agencies like USAID generally aim to improve the incomes and life conditions of the target population, the impact of their interventions on local economies has usually been negative, as studies of the subject all too depressingly show. James Gardiner of the Ford Foundation, for example, told me that a survey of the consequences on peasant farmer incomes of all its development programs over a period of several years found that in all cases the farmers were poorer than they had been before the projects were launched. Nor have negative effects been limited to economics: many projects have disrupted the social structure of the people they have been meant to help, creating more problems than they solved.

In contrast to this disheartening picture, a fairly modest investment by USAID in Sierra Leone has produced positive results, the artisans and craftsmen of the cooperative deriving real economic benefits from the intervention. An analysis of the reasons for this modest success may be as instructive as the many critical studies of the more common failures.

How did USAID become involved in supporting an arts and crafts cooperative in Sierra Leone? The credit for the initiative goes to Susan Samuels, the wife of a former United States Ambassador to Sierra Leone. Samuels became interested in the Gara Women's Association which was trying to develop the *gara* or tie-dyed textile industry in



Mimi Foray (second from right), with other members of the Sierra Leone Arts and Crafts Cooperative, in front of their transport vehicle.

the country. She was convinced there was export potential for the beautiful cloth for which Sierra Leone is famous and that, if this market could be established, it would improve the incomes of the hundreds of women from all over the country who practice this craft. To promote interest, she held fashion shows for the women in the diplomatic community where the Gara Women's Association was able to sell some of its tie-dyed fabric. Eventually, her enthusiasm led to USAID's involvement in the *gara* industry.

The Gara Industry in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leonean women produce some of the most intricate and

beautiful resist designs in textile art. Gara, the generic name given to fabrics produced by the techniques of batik, block-printing, and tie-dyeing, is derived from the indigo leaf used to make the dark blue gara dye. Traditionally, gara was prepared from a mixture of boiled indigo leaves, caustic soda, and tree roots. An extract from the kola nut is also used for dyeing the cloth and many fabrics alternate threads or sections of the two natural colors, blue and brown.

The fabric itself was produced from locally-grown cotton woven in narrow strips. The long cotton bands were even used as a medium of exchange in early contacts with the Portuguese, enabling the local

people to obtain manufactured goods from the European traders.

Weaving has traditionally been a male preserve, each village usually having its own specialist in the craft. The art of dyeing the material belongs to women who, as children, learn it from their mothers. The narrow strips are sewn together and the larger pieces are then used for clothing, for bed covers, and for wrapping the dead at burial. "Country cloth," as this material is called in Sierra Leone, is highly valued.

Textile crafts such as these are practiced in many parts of West Africa and the art of resist-dyeing has also developed in many other parts of the world among settled agriculturalists, but the gara industry in Sierra Leone has earned a reputation for being one of the finest in West Africa.

The local textile industry in Sierra Leone, as in many parts of the world, suffered greatly as a result of trade relationships established during the colonial period. Britain, in particular, had a textile industry for which to find markets, and its African colonies were obvious targets. Cheap textiles designed especially for the African market began to make their way into the local economy. Imported thread and dyes were cheaper, in monetary and labor terms, than those produced domestically. First Britain, then Holland dominated the market with printed cottons designed to appeal to African tastes. More recently, Japan has entered the competition with cheaper, though inferior quality, substitutes.

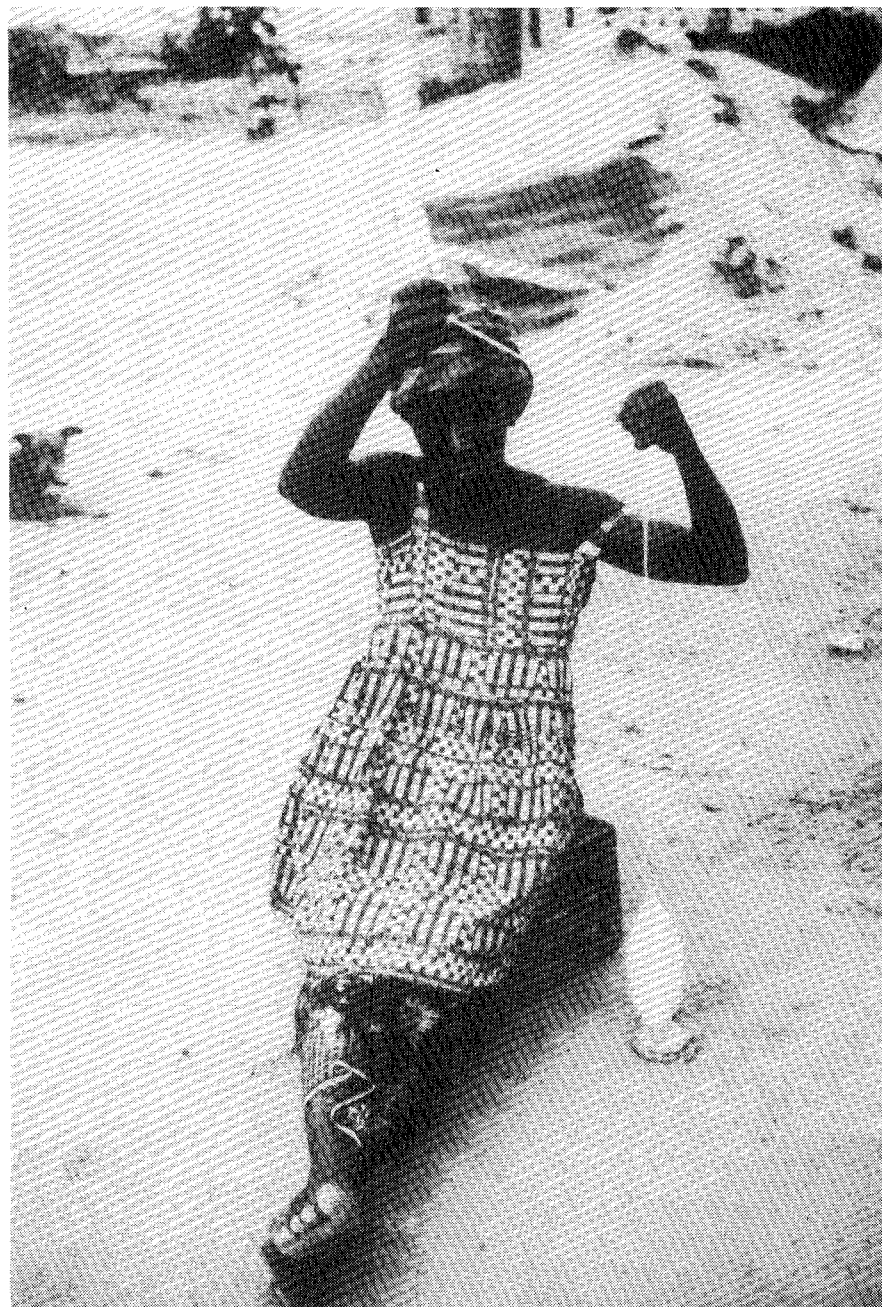
Today it is very difficult to find a country cloth woven entirely from locally grown cotton: imported thread is combined with homespun and often weavers are forced to depend entirely on foreign manufactured supplies. Women who tie-dye have also switched to using imported cotton fabrics and commercial dyes. While the availability of the commercial products has increased the variety of colors and

patterns these artists can create, it has also made the industry dependent upon imports. World inflation, particularly over the past ten years, has produced rapid escalation of prices of imported materials and local textile producers have been largely eliminated from the competition.

The gara industry in Sierra Leone is today totally dependent upon the importers, many of them Lebanese, who have proved to be adept at circumventing foreign exchange controls. As a result there has been

a general depression of local cottage industry, which affects not only women but also many men who make their living through tailoring and intricate machine-embroidering of garments from the cloth.

Sierra Leoneans prefer the locally dyed materials, but cannot afford them except for special occasions. Sales are helped only slightly by a minuscule tourist industry. Recognition of this problem convinced Samuels of the urgent need for markets outside Sierra Leone.



Gara thread is traditionally spun and dyed by women; while men, such as the Juhun village weaver pictured on the facing page, weave the cloth.

The USAID Project

At one time, most of the items produced locally were primarily utilitarian and designed for local consumption. The influx of cheap manufactured substitutes had, over the years, eliminated most of this demand and transformed the articles into objects of "ethnic art" with a very limited market. There was also a serious problem of logistics: the craftsmen are scattered all over the country; most of them do not read or write English; they have little or no access to transport; and they

certainly have no acquaintance with the complexities of international marketing.

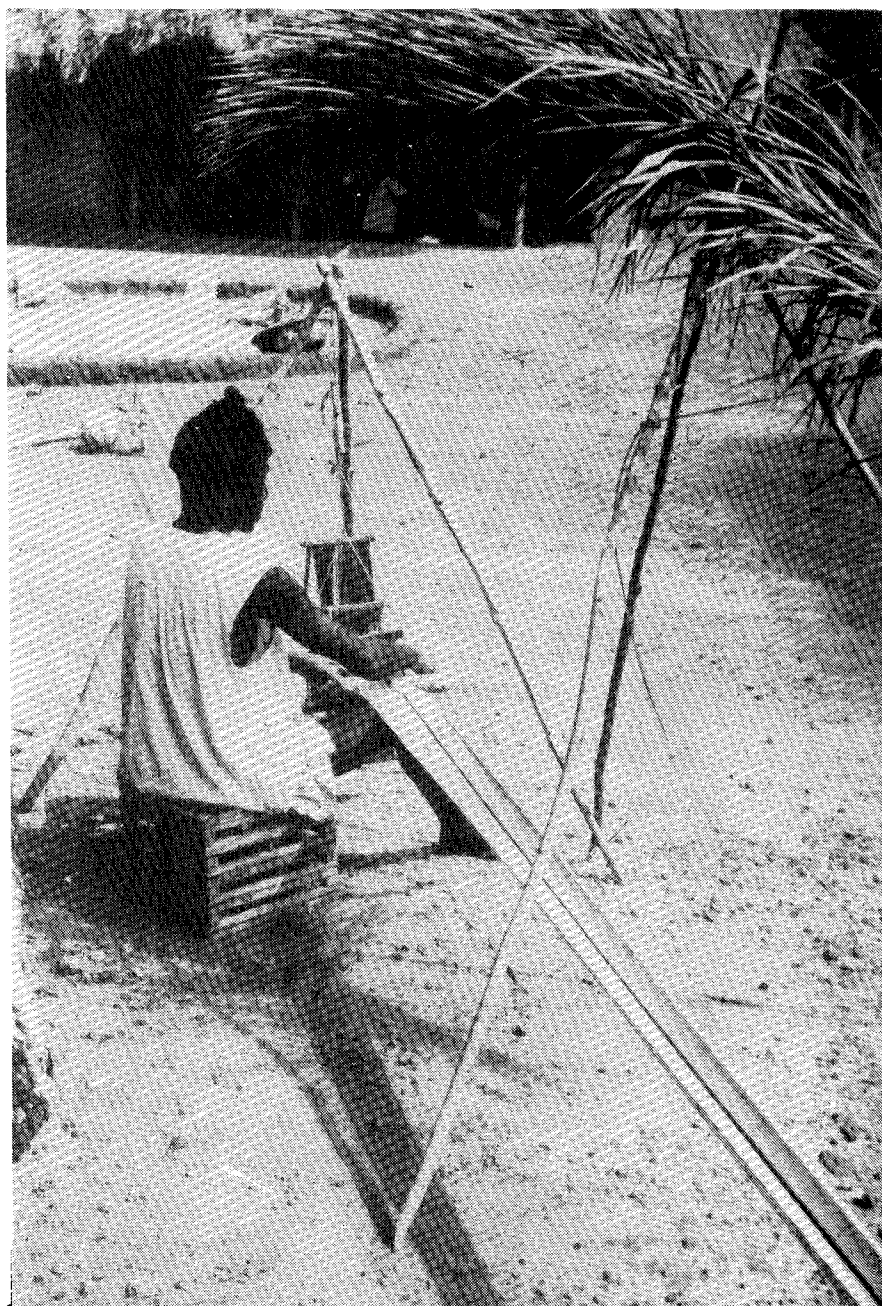
The first USAID agreement with the Sierra Leone government and the Gara Women's Association was signed in 1976. The aims of the project were, first, to develop and expand the domestic market for gara cloth produced by rural women by reducing the costs to them of imported fabric and dyes and, second, to attempt to create an export market. Thus the project fell

within the broader aims of USAID—namely, to increase the incomes, productivity, and welfare of women, particularly rural women, in Africa, and to expand their capacity to contribute to economic development generally.

The Sierra Leone government welcomed the project because it was in harmony with its own National Development Plan, which gave priority to the growth and development of indigenous industries. The government had already identified some of the factors impeding development of the textile component of the handicraft industry: the labor force was fragmented, geographically and ethnically. The many individuals and groups engaged in the craft were working independently and competitively. Essential raw materials were bought in quantities too small to effect bulk savings, and their price and distribution, as noted, was controlled largely by Lebanese traders. Not surprisingly, the many women engaged in the industry were unable to borrow money owing to a lack of capital and creditworthiness. These problems combined to hinder continuous production of goods, even had there been a steady inflow of orders, while marketing was hampered by a lack of expertise.

The obvious advantages of forming a cooperative to buy raw materials in bulk had already been perceived and had resulted in the formation of the Gara Women's Association. It was hoped that, with proper management, this cooperative effort could buffer the individual producer by reducing the costs of supplies and by helping to find more outlets for its members' finished products.

USAID could offer the most immediate and practical assistance to the gara industry in marketing. Juliette Blackburn, appointed USAID marketing consultant to the Gara Women's Association, was assigned to make suggestions for product diversification, to appraise the export potential, to identify markets in the United States and elsewhere, and to design an export promotion scheme. After an initial period of investigation, Olive Wong, an American costume and fashion designer, was brought to Freetown to serve as the resident manager of the project.



Institutionalizing Cooperation

The organization of the gara industry does not lend itself to cooperative effort. Women in West Africa have always carried the bulk of responsibilities for the daily upkeep of their families, their main economic activities traditionally being agriculture and petty trading, the latter largely in urban areas. While trading requires some capital investment, its returns (usually meager) are immediately available for purchasing food and paying the other expenses for which women are responsible. Tie-dyeing has rarely been a woman's main economic activity, because of the high capital and labor investment. Few women consider the returns sufficiently large or immediate to justify devoting themselves solely to this craft as their source of income.

Most dyers work alone or with a few members of their households. The tying of the cloth is very hard physical work and men are often employed for this task and for selling the *lappas* on the street. (A *lappa* is the local name for a piece of cloth about two yards long, which a woman ties around her waist as a skirt.) A very few women have organized dyeing as a commercial enterprise and may produce as many as 150 *lappas* per day with a work force of up to 100. In the main, however, the industry is carried on by individual women for whom it is an occasional source of very limited income. Since profits are low and competition high, it was difficult to get the women to consider the advantages of working together.

Ethnic rivalry, another residue of the colonialism, has been another obstacle to cooperation. Moreover, an important feature of the art itself—the secrecy maintained about the precise technique involved in tying certain complicated patterns—also contributes to mutual mistrust among craftsmen.

Even the weather is a factor. The tying and dyeing of gara cloth involves several processes. While tying can be done under a roof, the cloth, once it has been dipped in the dye, must be dried for several hours in the sun. Depending on the number of colors used, this process may be repeated two or three times. The



Intricately tied and dyed gara cloth drying in Sierra Leone's seasonal sunshine.

rains in Sierra Leone can begin in May and last until October. This period coincides with the time before the harvest when money is in short supply. While this halt in production during the rains was a minor factor in the past—the women did not have the cash to purchase materials then—the effect of the rains had to be considered when planning for export, as production for an international market must be continuous.

Transportation difficulties also impede the commercial viability of the gara industry. Even if a village woman has solved all the other problems associated with her craft,

she may find that the costs of taking her finished product to market render her work unprofitable.

Juliette Blackburn and Olive Wong recognized the necessity of adapting conventional economic wisdom to local circumstances in seeking to solve these problems. The first step was to tackle management problems within the Gara Women's Association. The association had been formed under the Development of Industries Act of 1960, which sought to promote the development of indigenous resources, provide employment, and generate economic activity within the country. By 1976, however, there were

only 150 members of the association. Thousands of potential members were discouraged by the high membership fee (Le. 10, about \$14) and lack of evidence that the organization offered real benefits.

Initially, the two USAID consultants worked with the association's existing leaders in helping them create systems for recording membership, accounting for and managing finances, and encouraging among them a sense of community of purpose and involvement necessary to sustain the program when the foreign advisers withdrew. Three Sierra Leonean women were selected to attend an administrative training course at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science in the United States. (Eligibility for selection included the ability to speak and write English, some secondary school education, previous Gara Women's Association membership, a proven knowledge of the gara art, good health, and the freedom to spend four months away from home.) Upon their return, one was to serve as office manager in Freetown, while the other two were to tour the country, making contact with the gara producers and instructing them in various modern techniques to improve the product. In addition, one of the three was to work toward expanding the domestic market and developing new foreign outlets for the fabrics.

Although Freetown was the organizational center, the project sought to increase the involvement of women in outlying areas by establishing rural centers. The USAID grant provided funds for purchase of a vehicle and travel expenses within Sierra Leone.

Exploring the International Market

In September 1977 the Gara Women's Association exhibited at the Merchandise Mart International Fair in Atlanta, Georgia. Their display included lappas, dresses, shirts, and other clothing, as well as tablecloths, bedsheets, and some other craft items. Here, the Sierra Leonean women learned something about the demands of the foreign market. They were able to observe the work of other exhibitors and to compare sales techniques; they learned to how to prepare sales lists, practice sales talks, and take orders; and they experienced the kinds of

TABLE I
Breakdown of Agency Responsibilities
Government of Sierra Leone

Government Agency	Responsibility
Ministry of Trade and Industry	Negotiation of import-export agreements, licenses, permits, customs, clearance, etc.
Department of Cooperatives	Administration of project, supervision of project sites and personnel
Department of Small Industries	Location of craftspeople, allocation of raw materials, product development and trade fair participation

Other Agencies

The following agencies are already involved in or have expressed interest in various aspects of the project:

Agency	Area of Interest
<i>CUSO</i> , Canadian Universities Service Overseas, Freetown	Rent for arts and crafts store in 1979. Contribution to seed capital and negotiation of loan through OXFAM
<i>CRS</i> , Catholic Relief Services, Freetown	Contribution to staff salaries at arts and crafts store
<i>UNIDO</i> , United Nations Industrial Development Organization, Freetown	Short-term technical consultants
<i>FRITA</i> , Fund for Research and Investment for the Development of Africa, Paris	Technical assistance for negotiation of purchase of raw materials and marketing
National Council of Negro Women, International Division, Washington	Exchange visit to related projects in other parts of Africa, marketing and outlets
<i>CID</i> , Consultants in Development, Washington	Short-term marketing consultant
<i>OICI</i> , Opportunities Industrialization Center International, Bo	Advertising and marketing in United States

personal interactions outside their own cultural milieu basic to broader market transactions.

Most of the other 3,000 fair participants were boutique and gift shop owners. Many expressed interest in the Sierra Leoneans' work, offering both praise and helpful criticism. Television and newspaper coverage provided additional exposure. Many potential business prospects were developed and some orders were received as a result of this participation.

Gara News also made its appearance in 1977, reporting on the fair,

meetings, and events. Besides reinforcing the notion of membership in the association, the newsletter is used to inform women about production standards, market requirements, and the schedule for raw materials deliveries through the cooperative. Although the newsletter is written in English, the language problem has been overcome to some extent by community workers who share its contents with nonreaders or non-English speaking members.

The experiences at the Atlanta trade fair, together with the recognition that gara women were not the only

artisans in the country producing crafts with export potential, led to a decision in 1978 to enlarge the scope of the project. With additional support from the Canadian government, the Gara Women's Association merged with other craft workers to form the Sierra Leone Arts and Crafts Cooperative. All craftsmen, it was felt, had similar problems; by combining forces in a cooperative effort, the organization would be strengthened and new products added for its venture into international marketing. As Olive Wong discovered, "The most beautiful craft items are made in the remotest places."

In 1979 USAID made a second grant for a further two years under an arrangement that required the recipients—the Sierra Leone government and the Arts and Crafts Cooperative—also to contribute. USAID gave \$205,000; the grantees had to provide \$68,500 "in kind" and from sales. "In kind" contributions included providing office and work space for the cooperative as well as assuming responsibility for services required from the three participating government agencies (the division of responsibilities is given in Table 1). Most of the USAID funds were made available during the first year with the aim that the cooperative should be largely self-supporting by the project completion date, June 1981.

The Work of the Cooperative

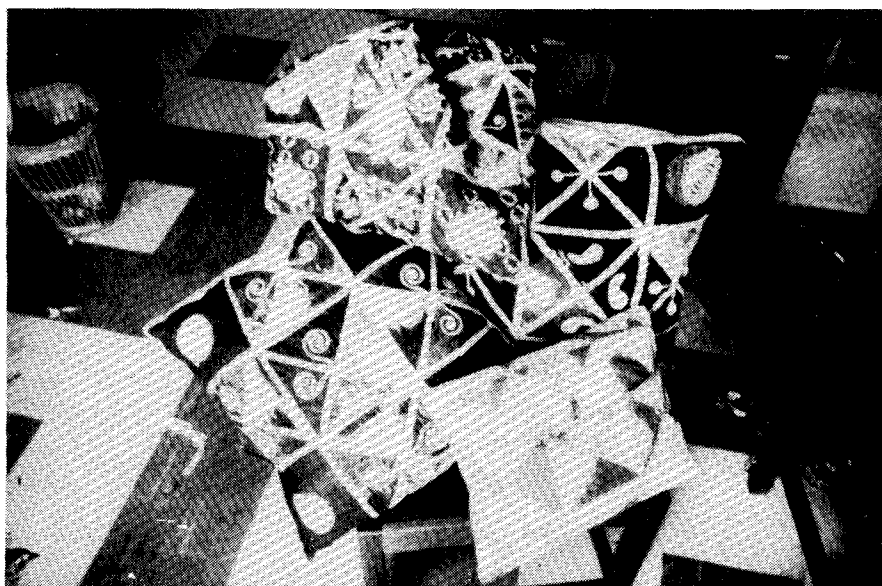
The Sierra Leone Arts and Crafts Cooperative has office space, a workroom, and a boutique in Freetown where finished products are displayed for sale. The rooms provide a meeting place for the members of the cooperative. Artisans bring their products for sale to the cooperative which, in turn, sells them to international markets; they also can exchange ideas and get advice on how to make their crafts more marketable.

The cooperative helps the artisans by selling them raw materials at wholesale prices. If a recognized craftsman lacks the capital to purchase an item such as cloth, the cooperative may provide it free of charge, paying for the workmanship when the finished product is returned. Thus the cooperative can more easily exercise quality control and encourage artists to think of



Above, a Cooperative member experiments with lengths of brightly colored fabric in the organization's workroom. Craftsmen below work at home on leather goods.





customer tastes beyond the local Sierra Leonean market.

In 1979, according to one estimate, the cooperative had already earned over \$10,000 in foreign exchange through its exports, as well as increasing the earnings of many local men and women. In 1980 Olive Wong made an agreement with a New York company—the Bamboula Association—to represent the cooperative at craft shows throughout America. The local market has also been expanded through regular exhibitions at agricultural fairs and other domestic events.

It is in the workrooms, however, that the cooperative tackles the most fundamental problems involved in marketing African textile art overseas. The first set is breaking through the cultural stereotypes in the West that tend to identify gara cloth as "ethnic art." As Olive Wong puts it, "There is a need to convince Western fashion designers that African fabrics and designs are adaptable and that much more can be achieved with them than making the customary kaftan." To this end, the cooperative employs seamstresses and a tailor to experiment with a range of fashions using gara and country cloth with embroidery decoration.

The necessity of changing the image of gara is underlined by Olive Wong's experiences in marketing other arts and crafts produced by the members of the cooperative. The attitude of most department store buyers in New York, Paris, or London is decidedly cool. Often she is informed curtly that they do not buy "ethnic." In specialized handicraft shops selling baskets, mats, woven shawls, leather and cloth purses, costume dolls, tree ornaments, and jewelry, etcetera—the Sierra Leonean products are generally not priced competitively, compared to similar items from East Asia, India, and Latin America. Yet the absence of mass production techniques and the high cost of imported materials hold little promise for lowering prices. Sierra Leonean artisans are accustomed to bargaining with tourists in the tiny local market where they are usually able to get the higher prices they need on

Examples of gara art

individual sales. The only long-term solution for gara cloth is to break out of the ethnic category and influence the higher-priced segment of the fashion industry.

On these as on all problems, the organizers emphasize active member participation and self-help. The success of that effort is reflected in a number of ways, but for me the most striking was the manner in which the leaders were identified. When I first appeared on the doorstep of the workrooms two years ago, I asked to meet "the leader." Olive Wong was in the room, but I was taken first to Mimi Foray, a woman I had known over a period of more than ten years for exceptionally beautiful tie-dyeing. A former secretary of the Gara Women's Association, she was now a full-time employee of the cooperative. (In development circles she would be referred to as "Olive Wong's counterpart.") Olive and Mimi work in a real partnership, but there is no doubt that it is the Sierra Leonean women themselves who are in charge of the organization. As leaders, the women encourage responsibility and commitment, in part by emphasizing punctuality in fulfilling orders and the need to improve the quality and consistency of their products, in part by stressing the importance of working together to achieve the economic strength that will, in turn, better the lives of the individual members.

Implications

The USAID project has demonstrated that gara-making and other crafts are economically viable. Modest financial support, less than \$300,000 in all, both encouraged an industry which serves as a unifying element of national pride among persons of differing ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds and provided a degree of economic independence to a group which usually experiences the benefits of aid at second-hand, if at all. Moreover, the project has concentrated on a much-revered art form, close to the hearts and experiences of many local people, rather than introducing alien technologies and new products. By eliminating the middleman's costs, mainly through duty-free imports and cooperative, bulk buying, it has allowed artisans to earn greater returns from their labor.

There are problems nevertheless. The government will have to continue to protect the local industry from the vagaries of inflationary costs of raw materials, perhaps by way of subsidies and certainly by continuing its duty free import policy. The cost would be small, relative to that of unemployment for so many artisans.

Even the modest success of this USAID project in increasing incomes, however, illustrates the futility of efforts to make significant improvements in the economies of

countries such as Sierra Leone with their near total dependence upon imports of manufactured items. For the Sierra Leone Arts and Crafts Cooperative to have significant effect on the local economy through successful export marketing, the government would have to take even more ambitious steps to reduce dependence on imported materials by developing a local cotton industry, including construction of a fabric mill. Such capital intensive industries are beyond the capabilities of a small country like Sierra Leone, although organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States* could take such an initiative.

In the meantime, the government must nourish the enthusiasm the project has generated. While the earnings of the Sierra Leone Arts and Craft Cooperative will probably always seem insignificant relative to the national budget, the increased incomes of its members have made an enormous impact on their lives. And the project might just succeed in fulfilling Susan Samuels' dream of affecting Western fashion tastes in the years to come.

(August 1981)

*For a discussion of this organization, see my "ECOWAS: The Economic Community of West African States" [BHB-1-'79], *AUFS Reports*, No. 6, 1979.