

Women and Creativity¹ in Sustainable Development: Reflections from Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa²

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ABSTRACT In South Africa's rural areas, including the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, life for Africans has been generally bleak. State support for infrastructural development was restricted to large-scale agriculture dominated by Whites. While African males from the rural areas provided cheap labour for South Africa's mines, industries, commerce and domestic markets, their women became more prone to impoverishment. Faced by successively oppressive governments during apartheid, and since 1994 by an inexperienced Black dominated post-apartheid government, women in Kwazulu-Natal's rural areas have continued to rely upon local knowledge and resources to make a living. Their efforts demonstrate the sensitivity that is required to understand how their kinship networks, neighbourhood ties and interpersonal relations function to make their lives meaningful in a world of continuous uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

KwaZulu-Natal is South Africa's most populous province and has an unemployment rate that exceeds forty percent. For this reason many, especially women, have relied on the land to eke out a living and avoid a life of complete helplessness. The province was once home to a large diversity of exotic plants, but recent assessments of the region's botanical resources has demonstrated rapid depletion of some species and total extinction of others. This provides compelling reasons for immediate steps to be taken for their careful management. One such plant which has reached a critical point in its existence, because of the extent of its exploitation in the region, is the *Hyphaene coricea*, which is commonly referred to as the "ilala palm" (hereafter referred to as such). Official and academic interest in ilala palm and related plants used in handicrafts began for two reasons. First, in the 1950s it began when there was an expressed need to gather the names of indigenous grass and grass-like plants

used for handicrafts. This exercise was to learn about indigenous names of exploitable local plants and to build up a classificatory list for documentation and academic purposes. During this period there was extensive involvement of school pupils from the rural areas because of their knowledge of the plants and their engagement within their households in the plants exploitation. In the first compiled list there were at least one hundred and twelve names of grasses and grass like plants from all these sources. They were found to include rushes, reeds, palms, dwarf bamboo and lily varieties¹. Second, the interest in these plants took a new turn in the 1980s when the survival of so many varieties was being clearly threatened. Extensive research and a range of papers were written to cover this issue (Crouch, 1981; Cunningham, 1987; Cunningham and Milton, 1987; Milton, 1987; McKean, n.d.). While the researchers, many of whom are ecologists and botanists, recognised the long-term impact upon those whose survival depended on these plants, they paid little attention to them. Their main interests have been to study the uses to which the plants are put, their distribution and their effective management, in order to ensure their reproduction. Their primary interest is ecological balance and environmental care.

The purpose of this paper is to go beyond this approach by focussing on the social dynamics surrounding the production and distribution, by fifty African women, of the products of one of ilala palm trees, as well as the exploitation of other species that helps the women to remain as independent entrepreneurs. It's aim is to draw attention to the indigent rural women and how they act in creative ways to overcome their poverty, and to illustrate their skills in highly competitive urban-commercial environments. Only over the last few years has sustainable

development been linked with greater sensitivity to the plight of women, largely through the debates around environmentalism, poverty, resource management and sustainable development (see Elliot, 1994; Cole, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1995)⁴. The rising interest in these concepts and the strong emphasis on the role of the poor has led to more interest in the inter-face between people and the region's natural capital stock - defined by Goodland (1995: 1) "environmentally provided assets (such as soil, sub-soil deposits, atmosphere, forests, water, wetlands), which provide a flow of useful goods or services". However, only recently have major international institutions and researchers been openly admitting that indigenous people often have more to teach the world about resource management than to learn from them⁵. There are two aspects which are fundamental to this recognition, and which are of central importance to this paper viz. women and creativity. 'Creativity' is defined here as the ability to make distinctions in the utilities of the natural capital stock and to selectively utilize parts or all of a plant towards gainful employment. Together, both concepts bring out some of the realities of the conditions of life in urban and rural KwaZulu-Natal, especially as they pertain to the activities of women in creative forms of employment, and they plead for recognition of the lessons that the South Africa's post-apartheid Reconstruction and Development Programme⁶ can learn from it.

In the Foreword to Ahooja-Patel's (1995: vi) book on "Women and Sustainable Development - An International Dimension", P.N.Haksar restated a widespread belief that low status, low pay and low skills are the three pillars on which the work performance of women have rested for a long time.

Ahooja-Patel expanded upon this point by demonstrating how these are more imposed conditions than factual situations. Using case studies from different countries around the world she illustrated how women are repositories of knowledge and generally serve as guardians of the ecological systems they inhabit and exploit. Referring to the *Global Assembly on Women and the Environment: Partners in Life* (Miami: November 1991), she emphasised on the success stories of women who design survival strategies

almost everyday. She pointed out that at that level "strategies of development" signify that women face everyday hardships to meet minimum needs of the family and the struggle itself becomes a way of life (1995: 114).

The information in this paper has some resonance with the spirit in which Ahooja-Patel wrote her book. It aims to address three issues:

- (1) the contextualisation of Kwa-Zulu Natal's indigent rural women within a national and global framework;
- (2) the ways in which they meet the perpetual challenges and struggles that they are forced to confront on daily basis through interpersonal relationships, kinship bondage and community networks;
- (3) the implications of their activities for future policy development on sustainable development in South Africa's rural areas.

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA'S RURAL AREAS

South Africa's rural areas are dominated by growing children and elderly men and women who are no longer active in the country's urban-industrial complexes. These areas have become noted as major reserves of male labour in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries for South Africa's burgeoning industrial, urban-commercial and agricultural sectors (Bundy, 1979; Majeke, 1986). Most indigenous societies in South Africa were seasonal agriculturists with centralized chiefdoms and distinct political hierarchies. Sansom (1974: 248) identified three grades of polity in ascending order viz. independent chiefdoms, federation of chiefdom and finally kingdoms in which erstwhile chiefdoms became districts. But this was a period without colonial or industrial intervention. The erosion of the active male labour force created a vacuum in the rural areas, where the care of the elderly and the young were left to those who chose not to migrate. As remittances to the rural areas from male folk started declining for a range of reasons, their situations became increasingly destitute. Employment in the urban-industrial complexes was forbidden by influx control laws. Many had to turn inwardly and search for ways in which their environments could offer them a way out of their

poverty. A significant factor in South Africa's rural areas is that its people, by virtue of their indigenous birthright, have access to land through the notion of *isabelo*. This, however, is a privilege vested in the power of the local chief and is extended to inhabitants as trustees through usufruct control.

The position of women in sustainable development and resource management activities in South Africa must be understood against the background of indigenous values that predated and survived colonialism and later, white hegemony. The patriarchal conditions that prevail in KwaZulu-Natal's rural areas (notwithstanding its persistence in urban areas), is a reflection of the historical and contemporary social categories that make up the region's chieftainships. These conditions bring up at least two issues in the social hierarchy that explain the situation of women, viz. politics and the intrinsic link between symbols and their objects. Together, both issues defined women as special segments of their societies. Ritchken (1997: 202) for instance, sees the woman's womb as representing the forces of nature, intrinsically prolific and potentially uncontrollable. He sees this link being realized in for example, mythologies associated with miscarriage. When this occurs, it is necessary to have rituals to avoid natural disasters such as droughts. This meant that the social being of women was always under the threat of chaotic forces of nature from within her, translating politically into exclusion from the chief's court and confinement to her husband's or father's household. This precluded women from talking with any political authority. But this did not constrain them from exploiting their cultural knowledge to ensure that their households functioned and survived in creative ways under generally unfavourable conditions.

Among the colonies of Africa, South Africa's political, social and economic history varied significantly from its other counterparts. The origins of the capitalist agricultural economy (Bundy, 1979) and the consolidation of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century (Keegan, 1986) in South Africa, underwent a transformation that is unique in the continent's history. Over the last three decades this aspect has been extensively researched and reasonably

well documented. However, the preponderance of most of these works has been on the erosion of the fabric of the political, social and economic structures, and the hegemony that Whites, and subsequently multinational corporations have gained in its political economy, and the social impact of migrant labour. As mining and industrialisation burgeoned after 1870 (Keegan, 1986), white employers were selective about who they employed, targeting mainly the active male rural African labour force between the ages 16-40 years. Those who remained in the rural areas were the elderly, children and women, who had to depend upon remittances from their male folk who worked in the urban areas, industries, mining and agriculture, for their survival. Here too, Murray (1981), Sharp and Spiegel (1985) and Spiegel (1986) have done some prominent research on female-headed households in South Africa.

None of these researches however, placed a premium on survival in the rural areas that was based on creativity and innovation in resource management that is linked to the broader paradigm of sustainable development. A key aspect during white domination was to restrict people in small vestiges of land which went varying referred to as "locations", "reserves", and "homelands". The aim was to stifle the inhabitants and their development in these areas and to keep them as reservoirs of cheap labour for the country's thriving economy. Infrastructural development and the promotion of indigenous ideas of innovation and creativity did not receive any state support or encouragement. Until 1984, when the Influx Control Laws were repealed, African women did not have permanent status in South Africa's urban and industrial complexes, forcing the majority to remain in the rural areas.

Despite the harshness of colonialism and apartheid, especially in frustrating creative indigenous efforts towards survival, the creativity of the rural people was not eradicated. But it was the women who took the lead in creativity and ensuring sustainability in livelihoods and in what was left in family and community life in the rural areas. Information in this area however, especially in the context of environmental conservation and indigenous forms of exploitation in South Africa, has not been sufficiently investigated as yet. Numerous examples from other countries on

these issues could be instructive to the country's policy makers on sustainable development. In most of South Africa's rural areas we are forced to assume that during apartheid rural residents were compelled to supplement their remittances by sustaining themselves through their knowledge of their environments and the meagre existences they could eke out of them.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND WOMEN IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

In 1993 the World Bank produced a report on 'Indigenous Views of Land and the Environment'. It was written as a background paper for the World Development Report (1992) on Development and the Environment, and has particular relevance to the World Bank and its Borrower Countries. The funding for the project was made on the premise that indigenous people can make significant contributions to the appropriate design and successful implementation of Bank-funded natural resource management and biodiversity conservation projects. The Deputy Director of the Environment Department of the World Bank Andrew Steer, recognised that,

"Indigenous peoples especially when they have not been displaced from their ancestral homelands, possess quite sophisticated environmental knowledge and are frequently excellent resource managers" (World Bank Report, 1993: iii).

Each of the four papers of this World Bank Report, covering the Quichua of Eastern Ecuador, the Maasai of Kenya, the Samburu of Kenya and tribal Filipinos, bring out more than the conventionally understood indigenous perspectives on land and its resources. The totemic associations and multitude of meanings that each attributes to the various forms of life in their respective habitats demonstrate the sacred meanings which define their existence and identities. This however has not deterred large sections of their populations from invasion by the more powerful forces of globalisation and transformation. The Quichua for instance, "with the development and strengthening of Indian ethnic federations, have begun to reclaim the right to determine their use of land resources through programmes of natural resource management. These programmes suggest a means to combine

aspects of their traditional society and economy with the new technologies and the socio-political realities of the encroaching colonist frontier" (Macdonald *et al*, 1993: 12). The Maasai on the other hand are prepared to collaborate with the authorities in Kenya, but with the intention of retaining their ways of life and harmonising their indigenous knowledge with the new, such as through the wildlife tourism industry (Matampash, 1993).

All of the accounts that are discussed above have dealt more with the ecosystems than that of the people themselves. Their focuses precluded extensive analysis of poverty and issues such as gender involvement in resource management. In a thought provoking and challenging book on "Women and Sustainable Development", Krishna Ahooja-Patel (1995) stated that

As women constitute an overwhelming majority of the world's poor, their advance has to be regarded as the cornerstone of sustainable development. Indeed, enhance the status of women and we have already initiated the process of environmental improvement (flap of cover).

One of the reasons why women remain poor is because their right to work in their countries is still not recognised. Some of the worst violations are found in the developing countries, where women often contribute more hours to work than that of the men (Gabriel, 1991: 68). Ahooja-Patel pointed out that the nature of women's work in most rural and urban areas in developing countries is neither rewarded nor officially recognised (1995: 44). Yet literature on development and a range of other subjects continue to demonstrate the importance of women's activities in their households and in their exploitation of depletable natural resources. In whatever sphere they make their contributions, and however humble, there is an almost inevitable linkage to either the global economy or to global concerns in general. It is through this recognition, as Ahooja-Patel's book illustrates so readily, that so many international conferences and a diverse range of organisations have taken the responsibility to highlight the role of women in sustainable development.

In South Africa awareness in this issue is gradually increasing, although the role of women is yet to be more extensively analysed. The two

sections below will aim to cover the growing interest in sustainable development in South Africa, and illustrate how a depletable natural resource such as the ilala palm in KwaZulu-Natal, is being exploited under controlled conditions - by women.

SOUTH AFRICA'S GROWING AWARENESS AND DEBATE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In South Africa the problem of natural resource depletion was exacerbated by the overcrowded reserves, which gradually eroded the carrying capacity of the land. As a "corrective measure" the South African government introduced "Betterment Schemes" as early as the 1930s. Betterment schemes were propagated as an attempt to rationalise and improve agriculture in the country's African reserves. But the fundamental problem was one of space, an issue upon which successive South African governments since the 1930s, have refused to compromise. African populations were forcibly relocated into reserves that had no resources for infrastructural development. They were intended to serve as reserves of cheap labour for the burgeoning mining, agricultural and industrial activities, which lay in the exclusive control of whites. It became apparent, as Joanne Yawitch's (1982) pioneering research in five magisterial districts in the Bantustan of Lebowa has demonstrated, that betterment schemes served as a mechanism for the economic and political control of rural Africans. Under such circumstances the inhabitants in the reserves were powerless to control the inevitable exploitation of the natural capital stock, in some respects to the point of total depletion. For instance, in the former bantustan of Transkei there are no more ilala palm trees left.⁷ Without a state subsidised conscientisation programme or the mechanisms to control the exploitation of the ilala palm, unbridled use led to its total decimation in this province. The problem was exacerbated by the manner in which men extracted its sap for brewing local liquor. This has left the indigent basket and mat weavers, mainly women, without a resource to continue their economic activities, and left them unable to pass on their knowledge to their successive generations. Such a position

makes the implementation of Brundtland's (1987: 43) definition of sustainable development all the more urgent.

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The interest and debates on sustainable development in South Africa received a major boost from outside the country in a pioneering book titled "Sustainable Development for a Democratic South Africa", edited by British development economist Ken Cole (1994). Through his interest in Southern Africa he arranged a conference in March 1993 and attracted speakers from the USA, South Africa, 13 British universities, four non-governmental organisations and 120 participants. The book covered 17 topics, all of which were intended to serve as important lessons for South Africa's reconstruction and development after the demise of apartheid. The issues of poverty and reduced accessibility to employment and racially based inequalities were given substantial coverage in the book. The contributors have succinctly discussed some of the dangers that the country is likely to face in the process of reintegration into the global economy. For instance, Jesmond Blumenfeld (1994) looked at the effects of post-sanctions South Africa. He warned that in the process of restructuring the economy and the drive towards exports, inward foreign investment, outward South African investment, and the possibility of foreign loans to finance development projects, there is a likelihood of conflict with the need to redress existing economic imbalances and inequalities⁸. Other writers added their voices to the caution that South Africa needs to follow against the disruptive influences, such as the ubiquitous "structural adjustment" policies followed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Colin Stoneman (1994) for instance argued that such policies will prove disastrous, while Robert Fine (1994) emphasised that neo-liberal and structural adjustment policies in other parts of the world have led to coercion and suppression of the disadvantaged. For sustainable development to work, according to Fine, the voices of labour must be recognised as legitimate, and political democracy must achieve social legitimacy.

After the British conference on "Sustainable Development for a democratic South Africa" in March 1993 another major event took place within South Africa, in the major eastern Seaboard City of Durban. In a very original paper on "Environmental Sustainability and the Empowerment of Women" in South Africa, the World Bank's Robert Goodland (1995) critically illustrated the linkages rural African women have to the three main elements of Environmental Sustainability viz. technology, affluence and population. In the global scenario, since 1950, the world's human population has more than doubled its size, rising from 2.6 billion to 5.5 billion. Ironically, during this same period, while world economic activity has risen fivefold, more individuals live in abject poverty now than at any other time in history, and income distribution has become increasingly inequitable (Goodland 1995: 18). On biodiversity in South Africa, Goodland (1995: 37) pointed out that the country contains about 10 percent of the world's makeup; it contains more species than all the countries except Brazil and Indonesia. During apartheid, one strong aspect of this period was ecotourism, which resulted in South Africa having a relatively large portion of national territory, especially in rural areas, in some form of conservation status (about 6 percent). An overt characteristic of this landscape has been women and children, who walk long distances for water or wood for fuel. Their activities demonstrate that their daily domestic requirements have a significant impact on their environment. Since women are the majority in South Africa's rural areas, Goodland believes that there should be a trade-off between empowerment of women and a transition towards environmental sustainability on the one hand, and increasing the appropriation of the natural environment to support increasing numbers of people at a low standard of living on the other. His belief, and correctly so, is that it is unlikely and vastly uneconomic for South Africa to convert all its wildlands to human use. The damages would be irreversible if this were to occur. Goodland's presentation is a passionate plea for an integrated and holistic approach towards sustainable development in South Africa. He placed special emphasis on careful consideration for the most historically disadvantaged sector of

South Africa's population viz. women in the rural areas.

SAVING SOUTH AFRICA'S NATURAL CAPITAL STOCK

Conservation programmes in South Africa, to save its natural capital stock, has been carried out by its National Parks system, which costs the state about one million Rand per month (Goodland 1995: 37). In Kwa-Zulu Natal there have been sustained efforts to ensure the survival of economically useful plants that are used by the indigent for their survival. The uncontrolled use of many of these plants has placed them in the lists of endangered species. Steve McKean, a Resource Ecologist for the Natal Parks Board, wrote of the problems of medicinal plant conservation

The trade in indigenous medicinal plant species is a major conservation problem in this province. The commercial trade in indigenous medicinal plant species is conservatively estimated to be worth in excess of R90 million annually in Kwa-Zulu Natal. It is estimated that traditional medicine is used by approximately 9 million people. This high demand is causing the decline of numerous species, some to the brink of extinction. There are approximately 1000 species used for traditional medicine in KwaZulu-Natal. Approximately 30 species are either endangered or appear to be declining rapidly as a result of over-use (paper not dated.)

In collaboration with several institutes over a period of eighteen months, a remarkable level of co-operation was achieved with the distributors of these plants. Many, operating as street traders and from herbalist retail shops, have demonstrated their appreciation for the conservation of these plants and are actively involved in promoting their propagation among rural communities, with allegedly tremendous success⁹.

Another endangered species, about which this paper is more directly concerned, is the "ilala palm". This is an ethnobotanically important plant species in KwaZulu-Natal and in other areas of Southern Africa. For centuries indigenous populations have used leaf shoots as edible palm hearts, created an alcoholic brew (*ubuSulu* or *iNjemane*) from the sugary sap which is

fermented by natural yeast, and unopened leaves are harvested extensively for the manufacture of baskets and mats. McKean observed that selected leaves of size 0.8m and larger are preferred for harvest, at an early stage¹⁰ by women, who use bush knives to cut the plant. They often compete with men for the services of the ilala palm. Men tap the trees - often to a destructive point - for their sap by creating incisions on the bark between three and five feet from the ground. They are able to extract between two and four litres of the sap over a twenty-four hour period. The process is referred to as "bleeding the tree to death", hence destroying it completely. Fermenting is done by adding yeast and twenty litres of water to every litre of sap and brewing it over a forty-eight hour period. The brew is an illegal one and is sold to local clientele.

The total extinction of the ilala palm in the province of Transkei and its widespread destruction in Kwa-Zulu Natal has given rise to a conscientisation campaign by autonomous environmentalist groups and the Natal Parks Board (NPB). Local chiefs in most of the rural areas, where the tree thrives, have been advised to curtail the accessibility of the trees to men, and restrict it to periodic accessibility to women when the leaves are ready to harvest. The implementation of this norm has a history in Southern Africa, since the chief controlled public access to the means of production. Sansom (1974) noted that

Against feckless and selfish use of resources the chief set boundaries in both time and space, using his authority to enforce them. The chief defined areas for pasture and land for fields....By doing so he imposed he imposed a pattern of work and a patterned use of resources on his tribes people".

Similar patterns of procurement existed for the Swazi people for instance, as Kuper (1965: 493) observed how the chief, acting through ranked officials, served out land to the people. Schapera (1956: 71) found that in Sotho regions no one was allowed to cut thatching grass before an official declaration that the grass was ready. While the roles of chiefs and women are understood to be important mechanisms in conserving the ilala palm, especially demarcated areas sanctioned as Nature Reserves, have been

bounded for special control and surveillance to ensure the survival and propagation of endangered species such as the ilala palm. Women are considered more reliable exploiters of this resource and are specifically invited by local chiefs and Nature Reserve officials to harvest ilala palm leaves.

The Mpenjati Nature Reserve, situated in the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal, is one among the several Reserves that is engaged in ensuring the survival of the ilala palm. The Reserve is a mere 66ha in size, but it has a unique combination of five ecosystems, viz. marine, wetlands, coastal grassland, coastal dune forest and an estuarine. Its size allowed a count of the number of ilala palm trees within a relatively short time, obviating the need for sophisticated sampling techniques that would have to be used in bigger reserves. A request from inhabitants of Mpenjati's neighbouring villages to harvest ilala leaves from the Reserve led to an immediate request for an initial assessment of its distribution. On 14 March 1996 a count took place to provide a base upon which further recommendations for sustainable use of this resource could be made. After an appointed team of three followed a calculated process of counting, initial recommended harvest rates were made, based on data obtained by a project investigating the effect of different harvest intensities. The team estimated that the density of palm stems on the south bank of the reserve is 759. Of these, 62 per cent (472 stems) currently produce leaves of harvestable size, out of which only one leaf per annum should be sacrificed to ensure sustainable use.¹¹ Their recommendations have also been influenced by other characteristics of the ilala palm. They are slow growing trees that produce about four leaves per year. The seeds stay on the trees for at least two years and take another two to germinate.

The Mpenjati Reserve is surrounded by underclass African dominated areas such as Gamalaxhe, Ezingolweni, Thongazi and Nzimakwe. Permission to harvest is generally spread to women by word of mouth through employees of the Nature Reserve and who are resident in these areas¹². They pay one rand per day to harvest, under supervision, only the harvestable leaves¹³. The social dynamics between harvesting and purchase by the consumer

are important issues that need to be analysed in order to illustrate the human side to this process. The section below is an attempt to do this through an analysis of organisation, production and distribution.

WOMEN PRODUCERS OF DOMESTIC UTILITIES

Defining the Research Area

The producers of ilala palm products in KwaZulu-Natal are almost exclusively women. The site initially chosen to interview these producers was Durban's central train station. Responses from them urged us to interview other retailers of ilala palm products along Durban's beachfront as well - a well-developed and bustling tourist area. Both areas revealed a set of dynamics that were vastly distinct from each other. Durban's Central Station is the biggest in the province, and is situated on an arterial road that links many of the underclass townships in the Greater Durban Region to several industrial areas, as well as to the Central Business District. Clustered around the station are numerous business complexes offering a wide range of services. Situated close by is a taxi rank, which services mainly commuters from the African dominated townships as well as the rural areas. Situated only a few minutes drive away from the CBD, the station is strategically located to gain relatively easy access to most commercial, industrial and urban areas. My intense interest in this subject also led me to informally interview men and women, unrelated to the two groups mentioned above, who tried to attract the support of people at car parks at shopping malls and residential neighbourhoods. Their trade was irregular and carried out on foot on an individual basis. In all three areas a constant flow of commuters and shoppers constituted a ready market.

The train station's human traffic are mainly Africans who use this mode of transport to enter into Central Durban from the city's townships and other towns and cities. So there is a perennial flow of people from dawn to dusk in both areas, with the period in between characterised by a significantly reduced number of commuters. Their trading takes place on an 'informal'

basis, and the range of goods that are on sale is diverse. Pavements and the entrance to the train station are stacked with the goods that the retailers have to offer to the public. But my purpose was to focus upon those who worked with the ilala palm leaves only. On a single count on one day there were at least 132 women working in sixty-three "stalls" selling ilala palm products¹⁴. A stall at the station is an empty space that is used without permission from the authorities, to display goods for sale, as well as for sleeping. Most women continued to weave baskets, hats and mats while they attempted to attract business.

While the display of goods is symptomatic of at least two things, viz. the creative efforts of the retailers and of the lack of infrastructural mechanisms in the rural areas for such people to produce and earn a living from their activities. This raises fundamental questions about the sustainability of the urban-commercial environment under such congested conditions. The lack of proper shelter, sanitation, piped water to each make-shift stall, electricity, and the production of huge amounts of refuse as a result of their activities and sheer presence, has prompted questions from the local municipality about the long term viability of these stalls in the train station. Collectively, these issues have given rise to an unbridled situation of a motley of informal traders, and to strong public reactions. A weekly newspaper has commented.

The Durban Station complex on the Umgeni side has been taken over completely by pavement dwellers and hawkers. It is no longer possible for train commuters, both local and upcountry, utilising the main entrance as it is continually clogged by scores of rural folk, both adults and children. Railway authorities have allowed the situation to deteriorate and city officials, like similar scenes elsewhere in Durban, appear to ignore the long term effects....(The Asian, Vol.1, No.4, 5 August, 1997).

The situation on the beachfront however, revealed a different situation. The area is one of the prime tourist spots in the country. With beaches and surf conditions that are ideal for surfers and a well developed infrastructure with internationally rated hotels and restaurants, as well as a widely paved and well serviced pedestrian

area along the beach known as the "Golden Mile", Durban's beachfront is a major attraction for tourists and local residents. A number of retailers operated from thatched roof stalls that were built by the Durban Municipality, and from other legally designated spots that form an unbroken number of stalls that continues for more than a kilometer. Each trader enjoys legal status by virtue of the licenses that were granted to them by the Municipality. This ensures effective monitoring and control of the number of people who wish to retail in the area. Toilets, proper refuse facilities and piped water has made this a more attractive trading spot than the train station. The traders realise this and generally jealously guard against outsiders who are unlicensed to trade among them. The stream of pedestrian traffic is dependent upon the days of the week and time of the year. From Monday to Friday the opportunities for trading are constrained by the working hours of the local population who seldom visit the beachfront on weekdays. Weekends and holidays however produce a busier period along this stretch and better chances of increasing their trade. The status of the area affords them access to a generally more affluent clientele, especially tourists. Again, all the retailers were women. The goods they sold were of a wide variety, although ilala palm products formed the basis of their enterprises. But there was a distinct absence of a

"fundamental" activity that characterised the daily chores of their counterparts in the train station, i.e. actual processing of the ilala palm leaves. No manufacturing at all was evident along the beachfront, although the women did sleep at night in their stalls. The situation on the beachfront is qualitatively different from the train station. Although many operate as wholesalers and retailers, their earnings were often meagre. Age was not part of the criteria for engaging in such trade, and the areas from which they came were scattered throughout Kwa-Zulu Natal. There was just as much inconsistency in the periods that the interviewees traded. The table below captures a cross section of interviewees in order to illustrate these aspects.

The women travelled from remote villages in Kwa-Zulu Natal where the conveniences of modern urban life were unknown to them. Their earnings from their activities were generally low, although some notable exceptions did exist. At least five of the twenty women did not know their ages. In the circumstances of each of the twenty interviewees, there was visible evidence of entrenched inter-personal relations, which transcribed into strong kinship bondage and varying types of community networks. The ethnographic information will attempt to illustrate how these social forms exist through the extended case study method. It is an aspect that has been

Table 1: Depicting the characteristics of 20 interviewees up to August 1996

S.No.	Age	Years of trading (years)	Hometown	Distance from Durban (km)	Monthly Income (rands)
1.	30s - not sure	7	Ndwedwe	60	500.00
2.	40	12	Ndwedwe	60	350.00
3.	don't know	5	Mawoti	40	300.00
4.	23	3	Mbazwana		400.00
5.	26	2	Hluhluwe	250	400.00
6.	38	"long time"	Mtuba		300.00
7.	"around 30s"	1	Mtuba		500.00
8.	don't know	4	Mtuba		350.00
9.	48	10	Ndwedwe	55	700.00
10.	52	May 1996	Obonjeni		300.00
11.	23	2	Swaziland	1200	800.00
12.	30	Jan.1996	Empangeni	200	400.00
13.	20	15	Hluhluwe	250	350.00
14.	27	1 week	Mtubatuba	150	???.??
15.	"mid 40s"	16	Mtubatuba	150	5-600.00
16.	not sure	2	Empangeni	200	350.00
17.	18	Jan1996	Inanda	40	2500.00
18.	22	1	Mtuba		400.00
19.	55	8	Umbumbulu	70	350.00
20.	47	6	Groutville	85	450.00

varyingly referred to by writers such as Hyden (1983) as "economies of affection", and by Winthrop (1997) as "cultural knowledge". Both concepts appear to be intrinsic to the data that was collated for this paper in that the women, as the case studies will show, depended upon one another for support and kept alive time-honoured local initiatives by sustaining them through indigenous support networks. To Hyden (1983: 8) the economy of affection has nothing to do with fond emotions. Instead, it has more to do with a network of support, communications and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities, for example, religion. These groupings may appear disparate, but in fact they are linked together in systematic fashion by a variety of discrete economic and social units which Hyden believes in other regards may be autonomous, despite household units co-operation for productive and reproductive purposes. However, because such co-operation is not an inherent and permanent part of the production system, it tends to be *ad hoc* and informal rather than regular and formalised. Winthrop's (1997) concept of cultural knowledge on the other hand reflects some resonance to Hyden's theory of "economies of affection". Likening it to an iceberg, in which only a small portion of the whole is visible, it belongs to the domain of tacit or contextual understandings, symbolic associations and the like. Derived from this is the corollary that traditional knowledge exists through a community of understanding, rather than as the mental capital of particular individuals. In addition, he argues that creativity and innovation should not only be understood as isolated cultural acts, but in relation to an underlying tradition that from they derive. The ethnographic information here can also be likened to economies of affection and to an iceberg, which still leaves a lot to be revealed in terms of "contextual understandings and symbolic associations" in the region.

Ironically, the two largest earners listed in the table above were non South African citizens who only had ilala palm products as marginal items. But they capitalised on the market that the local ilala palm traders created over many years. The personal circumstances of each trader provided interesting material.

Case 1

G. S.¹⁵, an eighteen year old from Inanda, took over the beachfront stall from her twenty one old sister in January 1996. She is one of nine children whose parents are originally Malawian. It was her turn to postpone her schooling after completing standard eight (10th school year) to relieve her sister who wished to return to school to complete her matric. The ilala palm products were only a fraction of what brought in her days takings. The leaves for the ilala palm products are collected by her siblings from the bushes around their home. Her mother makes baskets and is generally helped by her brothers and sisters after school hours. In addition, G.S. sells candlestick holders, leather bags, sandals and wallets, as well as sculptured wood carvings. The leather bags and candlestick holders are bought in Kenya by a friend who travels there several times in the year. The wood carvings are made from wood by her father who travels to Malawi to bring home such wood. He produces these carvings after work and during weekends. His products are: big head of an African man - R250.00 each; small head of an African man - R130.00 a pair; smaller head of an African man - R100.00 a pair; big giraffe - R25.00; and small - R15.00. These products are labour intensive and made entirely by hand. Gugu has learnt the art of banking and deposits her takings on a daily basis, although she keeps money aside on her parents advise. The purpose for this is to purchase food and other domestic requirements that are to be sent home by a close friend or family member who might be returning to Inanda.

Case 2

L.M., a 23 year old from KwaManzini, Swaziland, has traded since 1995 with her friend Nokuthula Zikalala, from her natal village. The women in their village have formed a cooperative to produce ilala palm baskets and hats, grass curtains, clay pots, African beads and necklaces. Most of the material is purchased in Swaziland, although the clay pots are purchased ready made from a neighbouring village. Clay pots are their biggest source of income. Their trading is done on a fourteen-day rotational basis, because their permits are only for this

period. They leave for home to bring in new stocks as soon as others from their village arrive to replace them at their trading spots.

The two case studies above illustrate that apart from household and neighbourly co-operation, trading in cultural artefacts and domestic utilities, and work in general in the rural areas, revolves around women. For this reason, they have also become the custodians and transmitters of cultural knowledge, as well as the pillars of survival, being the main income earners. Both case studies above illustrate how diversifying what they have to sell increases their options of capturing part of the consumer market and remaining in business. With the assistance of four post-graduate students from my department - who were fluent in Zulu, I set out to interview fifty women¹⁶. The reception we received from most of them was warm and encouraging. They were eager to discuss their experiences with us and found it comforting that someone was interested in their skills as well as to listen to their problems. Our sustained contact with them over a three-month period revealed how the diminishing availability of the ilala palm and their indigent circumstances impacted upon their lives. Their knowledge of their local areas and the sensitivity that they expressed towards ruthless exploitation of the ilala palm demonstrated a tremendous degree of awareness of this endangered species. While they did not mind the control that the Natal Parks Board imposed upon the harvesting of ilala palm leaves, they felt particularly threatened by the reasons for which men preferred access to this variety of trees (see below). In the activities of their organisation, production and distribution, their sensitivities and innovative approaches towards maximising their income potential was distinct. The social dynamics that characterised each aspect revealed a complex set of values and circumstances about the traders domestic, community and work histories, as well as intricate knowledge about how to tap different class and ethnically based markets.

Organization

Analysing the organisational characteristics of the women traders first encouraged us to look at the possibility of establishing a most prevalent form of worker organisation in South Africa presently,

viz. union organisation. This phenomenon was not overtly visible as in so many industrial and commercial forums. There has been generally either a widespread ambivalence towards unionised organisation or sheer ignorance of it. Many women complained that they were paying fees to a union, via individuals, but without any guarantee that the money was actually being paid to such a forum. Their justification for such suspicion was that there was no union organiser and there was no evidence of mobilisation and representation. This led me to examine four aspects about their organisational characteristics, viz. individual circumstances, household arrangements, village community dynamics, and organisation within their trading spaces.

The individual circumstances of the traders revealed a diversity of experiences that reflected the dynamics of life among indigent but creative South Africans. Their histories of trading as ilala palm "specialists" varied at the time of research from one week to forty-two years¹⁷. The routes to which many got to its utilisation differed widely. For instance, the two case studies below illustrate the work histories of two divergent experiences.

Case 3

T., a forty eight-year old mother from Ndwedwe (about 50 km north west of Durban), took over her aging and retired aunt's business in 1975. She traded in several strategic areas in Durban before finding a niche at the train station. Her purpose was to supplement her husband's income earned in a building firm in Durban. The skills of making baskets, hats and mats were known to her since childhood, when family members used to teach how to weave the ilala palm leaves. But her responsibility after marriage was to tend to her children and the family farm (about two acres). After agricultural activities were shown to be less profitable than ilala palm products, and when the opportunity was presented to her by her aunt in 1975 to take over her business, she opted out.

Case 4

A., a thirty three year old single mother of three children had a long history of dependence on her spouse for survival, and later working in various places doing cleaning of premises - both

domestic and commercial. Her husband, who left her to work in the mines in Johannesburg, initially remitted money to her on a monthly basis, but eventually stopped it altogether. After several unsatisfactory attempts to find well paid and acceptable conditions of employment as a domestic maid, she felt compelled to engage in self-employment. Her scant knowledge of weaving ilala palm leaves and friends from her natal village in the province of Transkei (about 300 km from Durban) provided her with an opening for self-employment. Aida has been doing this for eight months at the time of interview, and feels confident about remaining in this field because it affords her a sense of independence and dignity.

The circumstances of both T and A reveal that relying either upon the land alone or remittances from spouses can be very stagnating. South Africa's black rural populations have never been privileged during apartheid, with state support, for agricultural upliftment. Hence, as opposed to large state subsidised scale commercial farming by Whites, black farming is subsistence oriented. Most of the active labour force are compelled to seek work out of the rural areas, having to travel long distances away from home, thereby fragmenting the family structures. In addition the accommodation they have is generally impermanent and often in make shift shacks.

From the fifty respondents only four of them commuted daily between their places of trade and more "permanent" accommodation. One travelled daily by bus from a major squatter camp within Durban, another sought shelter in a women's hostel in central Durban, a third travelled to a nearby African township, and the fourth went back to her rural home by mini-bus taxi everyday - about sixty kilometres south of Durban. The rest of the women stayed at their stalls because:

- their homes were too far to return to daily;
- some were from the neighbouring countries of Mozambique, Malawi and Swaziland;
- they could not afford alternative accommodation;
- it was impossible to be transporting their goods after hours everyday for storage - which was expensive;
- sleeping over in groups became a neces-

sary safeguard for the protection of their stocks; and

they have grown used to sleeping under such circumstances.

The women drew much comfort from the companionship they developed among one another in their occupations. As people from distant rural areas they realised a need for interdependence and sincerity towards one another. It became apparent that there existed among them an ethos of co-responsibilities, which were articulated through conventional kinship and /or neighbourly duties. The social organization in KwaZulu-Natal has a strong history of kinship roles and obligations, with the division of labour between the sexes being clearly marked.

It is uncommon to witness individuals operating on their own. Group dynamics, either as kinship or neighbourhood groups, are a distinct feature in the organisation around ilala palm processing. Their activities begin at the point of mobilising individuals from within their households and wider villages for harvesting, to hiring of local vehicle owners for transport.

Case 5

Mrs. T. and A. Magu were two sisters from KwaZulu Natal who married two parallel cousins from Swaziland. Their products are baskets, mats and hats, which are made out of ilala palm leaves - sought from both Swaziland and KwaZulu Natal. Their advantage lay in their social and kinship networks in their natal villages, where sympathy and solidarity allows them relatively easy access to ilala palm leaves. But their commitment is to interchange as sisters, in that when more material is needed, only one leaves while the other remains behind to protect their trading space. A relative's van is prearranged for transport with other women who wish to go and harvest ilala palm leaves. The cost of hiring the van is R120.00 and is shared equally by all the women.

Case 6

Mrs. Ka M.M., who only knows that she is in her 40s, is from a northern rural town, Mtubatuba. She has been trading in ilala palm products with a group of seven women from her village since 1980. Most of their material is

from a noted nature reserve area, Hluhluwe. Almost all of the group's work is in virtual harmony with one another in that they harvest, transport and produce together. When material is required they communicate with their kin at home for this purpose. At least three of the group would leave their train station stall for Mtubathuba where another process begins. They gather together their partner household members, as well as other women who operate out of their circle in ilala production. A truck is hired for at least R400.00 and the women go on an overnight trip to Hluhluwe to harvest ilala palm leaves. This takes place at least five times a year. But their difficulty is that not always do they get the required support to spread the cost of the truck, and not always are there sufficient numbers to conveniently pay for their return trips back home.

But mechanised transport is not always a convenience that is readily available. Recapturing their activities back to the rural areas provided touching insights that many put into their efforts to harvest.

Case 7

Thembisile, a 25 year old mother of two school going children claimed that she is one of a group of women who walk up to 50km to make their harvest. She was forced to find some form of self-employment because her husband was retrenched and she was unaware about ways of looking for employment. Walking to ilala palm destinations was a result of encouragement from her village friends who were equally indigent, but who knew of others who traded in Durban. She was prompted by the likelihood of earning sufficient to pay for her children's education and provide them with basic food. En-route to their destinations they sleep in bushes at night and continue the next day with their journeys to a coastal nature reserve. After collecting a manageable number of leaves, the women bundle them so that they may be placed 'comfortably' on their heads, enabling them to walk back the same distance. To make her first trip to Durban she had to borrow a total of R50.00 from three people to pay for her bus-fare. This cost is a major burden to her in view of the meagre profits she makes.

Cases 5, 6 and 7 illustrate the endurance and perseverance levels that are generally characteristic of the processes in ilala palm production. While the harshness of their lifestyles is often spoken about, they generally tend to accept their positions as their way of life. But significantly, each case demonstrates interpersonal and group interaction and the necessity this has for their survival. Their knowledge and activities are more than cultural, in that they are shared complementary experiences.

The processing of the leaves begins in their rural villages. An input is made by all household members, in one way or another. The product is made up to a point so that they may be packed in flat bundles that will allow the women to pack them into minibus taxis for transport to Durban. Every one of the fifty interviewees complained of the taxi drivers unfriendliness and often harshness towards them for bringing in such huge bundles. They often have to pay twice the fare or more - depending upon the space their bundles occupy, or upon the personality of the driver. Sometimes they are refused permission to board the taxis, which may lead to a delay in taking the next one, or postponing the trip until the next day.

Once in Durban, their problems are compounded by the lack of adequate and protective storage space, as well as by the impermanence of their trading spaces. Storage facilities of their products at night is available, but at a price that erodes significantly into their meagre profits. They therefore avoid use of this facility unless they desperately need to use it, especially when it rains. The women do not use protective chemicals in the manufacture of their products, which makes them vulnerable to inclement weather conditions. In the rain the leaves get soggy and rot, and in the sun it dries fast if not worked on immediately after harvest. An added inconvenience during storage is the cost of transport back to their stalls. Whether they have stock overnight or not, their trading spaces have to be occupied twenty-four hours per day, especially in the train station. A moment "unmanning" of the spots can be quite costly. Thieves are allegedly forever on the prowl in the area. When they have no stocks their absence at their trading spots can lead to its immediate loss to other vigilant

traders who are constantly on the lookout for more strategic places. They have therefore devised a rotational system that ensures their protection on the one hand and provides leverage for their personal and domestic needs on the other. For instance, grouping permits individuals to either go into central Durban or elsewhere, or to return home for their personal requirements while others oversee their goods and spaces. This permits peace of mind and allows for the preparation of mobilising for more stocks while in the rural areas. All of the trading groups do not leave together for harvests. Kinship and neighbourly networks in the rural areas help to facilitate ongoing trading by ensuring that households are cared for, that there is always some stock of ilala palm leaves that serves as a float, and that arrangements are made in advance for major harvests. The trading cycle therefore has an in-built overlap of stocks between one harvest and the next. In one instance the system of rotation revealed quite a heart-rending story. It was given by an eighteen-year old girl who suspended her high school studies for the benefit of her other two siblings at home. When the year (1996) is completed she will return to continue with her schooling while her sister will suspend hers to continue with the trading.

Their organization must therefore be seen against their personal circumstances and the hazards that they face on a daily basis. The absence of state sponsored security and effective union based protection consolidated their affinities to one another. There were varying reactions to the form's of protection that were supposedly in place for them. Along the beachfront they felt generally secure because the area was more frequently patrolled by police officers, and most have permits that legalised their activities. At the train station however, their trading was considered illegal and police patrols hardly ever occurred. More than half the women were either unaware of a trade union for them or barely heard of its existence. From the varying costs that were given to us to join a union, which ranged from five rands to forty five rands, there appeared to be more than one union based organisation. Only one woman was able to cite with ease the name of the "South African United Informal Business Association", which allegedly charged

forty-five rands for registration. Other women spoke of registering with a trade union for five rands. But with reference to any trade union there was general dissatisfaction with their ineffectiveness. The women felt that with their interdependence, group solidarity and perseverance they were able to achieve more for themselves than by depending on any organization. Although they did continuously stress the need for a representative body that could secure their trading places in the station, and get rid of the thieves and pickpockets who interfere with their trading by snatching purses or following clients after their purchases to rob them¹⁸. Traders along the beachfront felt that during vacations they stand the best chance of maximising their trade, but that petty crime impedes their hopes. Again, it is largely on the basis of their own organisational forms that they are able to remain vigilant and lookout for one another.

Production

Most women, as it was noted earlier, transferred their work on the ilala palm products from their rural villages to Central Durban. While harvesting and trade occurs in mixed groups, actual production is usually the responsibility of household members and the individuals most involved in such trade. The common explanation for this is twofold. First, it is easy for them to transport unfinished work by taxi because it does not take up much space. And second, it breaks their boredom by giving them something to do and keeps them busy at the train station. Respondents said that they carry between forty and sixty unfinished baskets, mats or hats with them by taxi. By this stage of the production they are still flat and easily bundled for transport in public vehicles. There are only the sides to join in order to bring them into shape when they reach Durban.

There are five common products of the ilala palm viz. baskets, mats, yard brooms, sieves and hats. The process in producing these products is characterised by an atmosphere of casualness and friendly chatting. Each is her own boss and works at a pace that is suitable for her. At our very first interviews at the train station a group of seven women happily received us when we made enquiries about their work. A few minutes later one of the women stopped her weaving and

apologized to us because she was tired and went off to sleep. They were all from a single village in the far north coast of KwaZulu-Natal, and had worked closely with each other for several years.

It takes at least four branches of approximately one metre length each to produce a medium size basket, eight branches to produce a two metre long mat, two for a broom, two for a sieve and one and half for a hat. In uninterrupted production it takes between one and a half hours, about four days, one hour, three hours and one and a half hours respectively to complete the above mentioned items. They generally have to work fast at producing their items for sale, in order to avoid falling victim to inclement weather (as explained above). However, when ilala palm leaves are unavailable, other sources of local material are sought in order to stay in business.

Case 8

Z. N., a 26 year old from Hlulhuwe said: "We usually have problems when it rains, because our goods get spoilt... and the thieves find it a good time to steal from us". She starts making the baskets at home with assistance from her family towards the end of month - when she returns home. When ilala palm leaves are not easily available, she and her household turns towards mat making. She explained that she had a log specially carved out for her by her father to carry out her work. There are three types of locally classified grass that she uses to produce her mats, viz. incema (Juncus kraussii), induli (Cyperus natalensis), and iqumbu¹⁹. The prices of her mats were determined by three factors, the availability of the grass, the appearance and appeal of the finished product and the ease with which each type of grass is worked with. Incema is brownish in colour and looks like long strips of hard dry grass, and costs R10.00 each; induli is flat but stronger and costs R8.00 each; iqumbu is a soft version of Induli, and costs R7.00 each.

The case above is an interesting demonstration of the ingenuity and creativity that poor but hardworking women have to show in order to maintain a dignified livelihood. When their predominantly exploitable material is unavailable, they turn their attention to alternative sources of material. They have shown how exploitation of

the indigenous grasses is a creative effort that acts as a safeguard against unemployment and possible starvation.

However, the pricing of their products must be seen against the background of several factors. First, most women are illiterate and are disinclined towards pricing their goods on the basis of the number of hours it takes to make a product. They tend to place minimum value on their "person time" spent on production. This is however dictated by the type of clientele they generally target, viz. underclass people. This is despite the fact they are aware of women purchasing from them as wholesalers, to retail to more affluent clientele on the beachfront at significantly higher prices. At least two issues emerged from our interviews with the train station women. First, they felt compelled to treat them as regular clients, and second they felt a sense of solidarity with their counterparts on the beachfront. "If we increase our prices to these women, they won't be able to afford what we make, and it will be too highly priced for others to buy", said one woman. Another expressed a more sentimental feeling towards the beachfront women: "They are like us (meaning indigent African women), so we must help one another". In addition, the women are from generally indigent backgrounds and their requirements for survival have been conditioned by their generally humble needs. The prices are also determined by the fact that their access to ilala palm leaves is not financially constrictive and that they are self-employed. The Nature Reserves of the Natal Parks Board take a minimal payment of one rand per harvest when it is permitted, irrespective of the number of leaves that each person harvests. Other privately owned land and land which is administered by local "traditional" chiefs also have an awareness of the women's situations, and charge a minimal amount for harvesting.

The production process is continuously impeded by various issues. There are allegedly persistent requests, almost on a daily basis, from municipality inspectors for the women to produce licences to legitimate their trade in Central Durban. Most women do not have them, and complained that they spend long hours at the respective offices to apply or enquire about the fate of their applications. Many have claimed to

have made at least one trip per week to the licensing offices and have waited months, but to no avail. One woman claimed that she was arrested more than ten times over the last five years.

Case 9

M., a "fifty two" year old woman who traded in several places in Durban since 1978, still did not appear to grasp the importance and convenience of having to wait long periods for her licence to trade in Durban. She appeared to still fear the notorious "blackjacks" - (apartheid policemen, mainly white, operative during the 1960s, until the mid-1980's). Her perpetual suspicion was that the application for a licence was a ploy to arrest her and repatriate her to the rural homeland (a measure of the once notorious Influx Control Laws designed to limit the number of Africans resident in the rural areas. Closer questioning revealed that M. appeared intimidated by the questions she had to answer at the licensing office, especially since she did not have a birth certificate and was therefore unsure of her age. Mav, therefore, felt more inclined towards production without a licence and was willing to take the risk of operating without one.

Case 9 is reflective of women who have grown used to living lives of perpetual uncertainty and confusion about their constitutional rights and statuses in post-apartheid South Africa. They are generally very humble and avoid being confrontational about their need to trade freely, having lived lives of total submission to authority.

In several instances women who have licences to trade along the beachfront have capitalized on their statuses by producing at home and taking the privilege of remaining there, letting out their stalls to others and placing a requirement for their consignments to be sold within a given period - as "rent". Such women felt ambivalent about their positions. While they were grateful for control over prime trading spots, they were constricted by the number of items they could sell for themselves. One respondent stated:

"I always have to worry about the lady whose stall this is. She is very demanding. If she tells me she wants her goods sold in two weeks

and the money sent to her by then, I must do it. Otherwise she will threaten to remove me from the stall. This holds back the selling of my own goods - so I don't always make too much", said one distraught "tenant".

At the train station the lack of water and cooking facilities, as well as their low financial positions, force them to survive on a monotonous high carbohydrate diet of bread and water. Their hunger and imbalanced diets often slows down their production. Another factor is the increasingly reduced access to the ilala palm leaves, which are grown under very strictly controlled conditions. The lack of its availability has prompted producers to experiment with other types of material. Along the KwaZulu-Natal south coast, which is closer to the province of Transkei, its scarcity has led to the use of three types of grasses that were not previously used. The advantage of this experimentation has led to the production of a new variety of baskets. An additional item that is being used for more affluent styled baskets that has established a market among younger working women and college students, are the soft inside coverings of maize leaves. This produces a softer, more aesthetically pleasing product that has replaced the stiffer version of the ilala palm basket. But the material is only seasonally available, and therefore provides a limited earning potential. At least three of the fifty women interviewed have learnt the art of making such products. Their life experiences reflected the concerns expressed in the WCED's definition of sustainable development - when the natural capital stock that is used for survival among the poor is exhausted through poor management, as the case study below reveals.

Case 10

P.M., a 23 year old woman from the province of Transkei (200 km south of Durban), traded with a friend and a relative from the same village. Her family was left destitute when their only source of income earned by her aging mother on ilala palm products, was discontinued after the destruction of the ilala palm trees in her area. She blamed it on overexploitation of the trees by women and excessive sapping of the trees by men wanting to brew local liquor.

Faced with extreme difficulties in trying to feed a household of eight people, P.M. tried several attempts at bringing money to her home without much success. A White farmer from an agricultural town in KwaZulu-Natal showed them a way to carefully dry the maize leaves for a two-day period by using certain plant dyes that would not destroy their colours. Thereafter, with the use of processed wool, which is cheaply available, they are able to produce baskets that have a greater appeal than the ilala counterparts. This has proved to be a very lucrative enterprise in that they got the leaves for free, and it was a tremendous relief for her family because of the money she was able to earn from this. But this is a skill that Philile and her companions prefer to guard very closely because it affords them the advantage of offering a unique product for sale. However, their disadvantage is that maize is grown only seasonally, thereby cutting them off from an important source of income. All three women have been trading in this product since December 1995, and have therefore not sufficiently familiarised themselves on how to substitute their unique products with others in their times of non-maize seasons.

The circumstances in the illustration above demonstrate that while the nuances of production reveal a particular set of dynamics in the lives of the women producers and their environments, their resourcefulness in distribution can be equally dynamic. This is largely a result of their creativity, which is derived from a determination not to mope in self-pity about their impoverishment or the loss of a long serving resource such as the ilala palm.

Distribution

There are well-defined clientele bases that ilala palm traders aim at. At the train station their clientele is mainly Africans who come from the townships and from squatter camps in and around Durban. Most of them are from underclass backgrounds and their purchasing power is limited. But the constant traffic and the fact that it is predominantly African traffic has led to a situation of acceptance and containment rather than outright removal by the municipality. A substantial amount of trade by African traders with African commuters takes place from this

venue. In fact, the arrangement and manner of trading at the train station is part of a broader phenomenon in the country²⁰, especially where African commuters are predominant. The solidarity that the wider African populations show towards their disadvantaged women is a key factor in them turning their trading spaces into centres of production as well.

At the beachfront, on the other hand, there is a broader diversity of people whose purchasing power is much greater. Dependent on tourists and more affluent passers-by, these women's methods of retailing are substantially more formal towards the public and more sophisticated in their arrangements. Their stalls are contiguous to the pavements and are more formally arranged under thatched roofs. The open manner of display and direct contact with the pedestrian traffic constitutes a form of advertising and persuasiveness to potential buyers. They are encouraged by the municipality and sympathetic pressure groups from the wider community to remain on the beachfront as a tourist attraction. Together with the colourfully adorned African rickshaw operators they are deemed to have a purpose in the city's tourist marketing strategy. As opposed to their counterparts in the train station, these ilala palm retailers have a more protected status by virtue of licences being issued to them. But their prices are twice that of the train station. Women along the beachfront were not too enthusiastic about revealing the source of their products. But their attitudes and gradual trust in us eventually corroborated the claim that the producers in the train station are their main suppliers.

In both areas of research their mannerisms and approach to the public is characterised by a form of pleasant "helplessness" which often draws the attention of sympathetic passers-by. But the sales for the day for most stallholders were hardly impressive. Most claimed to sell no more than between two to six items per day. This brought for them an average earning of thirty five rands per day (approximately five hundred rands/US125\$ per month). The cost of their products followed the universal norm of 'pricing being relative to size'. The amount of material they use is what determines the price. This can fluctuate in accordance with the people and areas that

are targeted for their products. The women have ways of reaching clientele in different parts of the city. They may either go themselves or use the services of family or friends for this purpose. The areas they target are residential suburbs, shopping malls and business districts. But there is a racially based rationale that is characteristic of their trading. Through personal observation and by virtue of their own admission it is clear that women selling their products specifically choose to go to Indian dominated residential suburbs and business districts because they find the people more accessible and tolerant of their informal trade. In White dominated areas their presence is restricted mainly to shopping malls, because their thrust into the residential areas is not taken as casually as Indian residents do. The prices as well showed a marked difference in the respective areas. They have been recorded as twice that in the Indian dominated areas. There is a prevalent belief that although Indians welcomed their trade they bargained a lot, thereby effecting discounts. But they are perceived by the women traders as not being as affluent as Whites. For the traders this justifies their price differentials. In order to increase their chances of drawing attention to their *ilala* palm products many tend to diversify the range of their goods by adding items such as wallets, table place mats, wooden dishes and spoons, and other artefacts. However, when sales are depressingly poor many of the women appear to have a reliance on what is commonly known in Durban as the "Indian Market"²¹, where their goods are either sold to the merchants, or left to be sold and the money fetched at a later date. The latter is especially done between the women and merchants who have negotiated special working relationships - in which there is a mutual benefit. Their multi-pronged approach to distribute their goods as widely as possible has helped to increase their chances of better earnings. But they do this through extremely arduous efforts. The general route that they take is by foot and they walk up to thirty kilometres per day in their tasks to sell their products. Some of the statements below are reflections of the added efforts that many women put into their attempts to ensure their sales:

"When my sales are fifty rands or less for the week, I have to go out on foot selling door to door. I leave some of my stuff here to be sold by my friends, and I go from shop to shop and house to house selling."

"I like to sell by the White people's super-market carparks because they pay us more than we get here for our brooms and baskets. Our African people don't have money and they squeal to pay."

"At least twice a month we go to the Indian areas to sell. We have lot of customers there, but they must bargain first, squeal a little bit and then pay us."

"A man at the Victoria Street Indian market sometimes buys my baskets and mats. When I am stuck he agrees to sell them for me and then he gives me my money. But he also makes his own profit too. We are doing this for many years now."

The quotations above indicate the efforts that are made to either maximize sales or go out to clientele to avoid stagnation. Their mobility is a product of their interpersonal arrangements and the cordiality they have established with people in selected areas.

CONCLUSION

Against the background of a province with an exceptionally high unemployment rate of more than forty per cent, and excruciating poverty, the mechanisms for survival among the most disadvantaged becomes an important area for careful investigation. Table 1, and collectively each of the ten case studies bring out the dynamics of individual circumstances, the inter-personal relationships among the women, and the ways in which they are embedded in kinship structures and community networks. They draw our attention to the hard work and long hours they spend on a daily basis in their activities that synchronises the economic with the social. Each is inter-twined and dependent upon the other, demonstrating how their perseverance and endurance can be converted into more profitable processes if only more attention is paid to this very productive set of activities.

In attempting to bring out the creativity and ingenuity those rural women display in their quest

for survival, a number of important characteristics emerged about their regular activities. For instance, factors shaping the production and marketing strategies, amidst a genuine shortage of ilala palm trees, the social dynamics that sustain the linkages between rural households and urban-commercial centres, and the social patterns that emerge as a result of them, are important in either arriving at a general understanding of their activities and for the sake of policy formulation. In situations where there are shortages of material that are important for the general well being of a population, authorities are known to invest much in resources and expertise, in order to improve their availability. In this situation more needs to be done to ensure the survival of the ilala palm tree and to work towards increasing its availability by producing a seed variety that can grow under more than one environmental condition, as well as work towards improving the aesthetic appeal of the indigenously grown products and their lasting capacity. Such efforts for instance, have become well known in periods such as the Green Revolution, when improved varieties of seeds for wheat and rice led to prosperous harvests in places such as the Punjab Province in India. Equally prosperous yields in milk occurred in the province of Gujarat during the "White Revolution", when capital and expertise was poured into the research of cows and their capacities to improve their milk output. Greater consideration of these issues in KwaZulu Natal are bound to transcend the limits of cultural knowledge and improve the production and marketing processes of indigenous efforts.

The possibility of such improved production and marketing strategies should also have a positive spin-off against the constant insecurity and uncertainty under which most of the women live. Contemporary rural lifestyle, which is characterised by broken families, fluid household structures and group networks in the city centres, as the case studies demonstrate, should give rise to a strengthening of individual confidence and gradual dissipation of such a social pattern. Gabriel (1991) for instance stated that when people are introduced to new forms of technology, their lifestyles are inevitably changed. This change - for the better - is the ultimate goal for people in South Africa, where not only Blacks in general were victims of racial op-

pression, but Black women in particular. While their inter-personal relationships and community networks provide excellent illustrations for the concepts of cultural knowledge and economy of affection, such information is instructive to additional analyses in sustainable development. In KwaZulu Natal, planning for sustainable development cannot exclude indigent rural women, whose activities are supporting more than forty percent of the province's population.

It is clear that an investigation of the activities of even the most marginalized people in the world today requires more than a simplistic assessment of their activities. In this study the situation almost exclusively reflects the situation of women. However humble their requirements might be and however little they may depend upon formal employment in urban and industrial complexes, it is now accepted that their livelihoods inevitably impacts upon the global scenario. Development can no longer take place in terms of the misrepresented notion of "Aid", in which the "beneficiaries" become victims of a system that they seldom understand. Development aid almost throughout the developing world has kept people living in perpetual hope instead of delivering services within a given time frame. Their growing poverty, vitiated by corrupt and despotic governments, especially in the rural areas, has forced many to turn to whatever resources that might bring them relief. The growing literature on sustainable development and resource management therefore continues to caution the world against the motives of development aid, which often leads to poverty, and in turn leads its victims to the unbridled exploitation of our natural capital stock. They warn us that ultimately the rich too will end up victims in a world that is depleted of its natural heritage.

The evidence from KwaZulu-Natal is an illustration of the role of women in its rural economy and of how responsive they can be when made aware of the dangers of over utilisation of specific botanical species. Their adherence for instance to the advice from the NPB not to over-utilise ilala palm branches is reflective of the roles they can play in resource management. As a broader principle, it makes it incumbent upon policy makers and planners to integrate local populations in the planning and implementation

processes. Their creativity and the human factors associated with it deserve more serious attention than has been historically given to them. They serve as indications of future potentials and of the meanings that their social fabrics bring to their lives. Jennifer Elliot (1994: 80) for instance argues that for too long the debates about the environment and development have been dominated by the interests and values of the rich rather than the poor, men rather than women, and urban rather than rural. She makes a refreshing point by stating that making the rural poor the starting point in research and development has been seen to have benefits for the environment and development. Under careful supervision they are likely to go on accruing benefits in the future, as local populations are educated about and gain control over their own resources. They would have more options regarding resource use and acquire security in their agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Indeed, the long term benefits of providing secure rural livelihoods for the poor, with carefully planned infrastructures, will also be of benefit to the wider communities. It will help in three fundamental areas of development, viz. relieving population pressure on resources (a prerequisite for sustainable development in the future), slowing the demand for employment and shelter in urban areas and keeping alive the cultural knowledge that sustain through their years of hardship. It is not only the depletion in natural capital stock that will make it difficult for future generations to survive from what nature has to provide. Cultural knowledge too is a resource and is indispensable to carefully managed exploitation of the environment. Post apartheid South Africa should by now have learnt this lesson only too well. With the post-apartheid Reconstruction and Development Programme paying only lip service to infrastructural development in rural areas, but having an outright urban bias that has brought more chaos in all of the country's metropolitan areas, and the failure of the government to deliver on its election promise to build one million houses in five years, Elliot's words of wisdom would be sound advice to South Africa.

NOTES

- 1 The concept is derived from the main theme of a

conference on "Creativity and Innovation at Grassroots Level", hosted by the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India, where this paper was first presented.

- 2 I am indebted to four post graduate students from my department without whose assistance I would not have covered so many interviews. They are David Bogopa, Nelisiwe Mlomo, Lungisile Shangase and Bongiwe Sibisi. I am also grateful to Prof. Robert Winthrop from Oregon, USA, for his guidance, to Dr. Alan Thorold and Gareth Morgan from the University of Durban-Westville for proof reading this paper and to the University of Durban-Westville for the grant that made this research possible.
- 3 Each of the plants mentioned have several varieties with independent botanical classifications. The reference did not include them.
- 4 In South Africa the debates are still largely around broad macro issues such as economic policies, educational policies and restructuring, with emphasis on women largely in the urban-commercial environments. However Elliot raises this as a universal phenomenon in all areas.
- 5 See the World Bank's Environment Department's publication on 'Indigenous Views of Land and the Environment', Shelton Davis, ed. (1993).
- 6 Introduced by the African National Congress after the country's first democratic general election, held on April 27, 1994.
- 7 Interview with Mr. Beattie Cullum (Chief Game Ranger), 12 September 1996, Mpenjati Game Reserve.
- 8 The visit to South Africa by the Director General, Mr. Camdessus, of the International Monetary Fund in mid-October 1996, led to deep divisions within the ranks of the ruling African National Congress and strong protests by an anti neo-liberal group.
- 9 Interview with NPB Ranger, Steve McKean, 20 October, 1996.
- 10 This fact was illustrated physically to us (third year Anthropology students and members of staff of my department) during a field trip to the Mpenjati Nature Reserve, 12 September 1996, by the Officer in Charge, Beattie Cullum.
- 11 Information was derived from McKean (paper not dated) and from deliberations with the Officer in Charge at the Mpenjati Nature Reserve on 12 September 1996.
- 12 The officer in charge was concerned, but powerless to act on the suspicion that when word is spread in the neighbouring areas for women to come and harvest leaves, mainly relatives of the employees are informed.
- 13 It is in this process that the innovation and creativity of the women who make baskets and mats out of the ilala palm leaves is best noticed. The leaves have to be 0.8m big, closed for the most part and worked upon immediately. Failure to do so could lead to damage by the heat of the sun or by rain.
- 14 My first count took place on Thursday 22 August 1996. However I cannot be sure that they were all the women who traded on that day, because the numbers to each stall fluctuate several in the day.
- 15 Abbreviations are used to conceal the identities of the interviewees.

for survival, a number of important characteristics emerged about their regular activities. For instance, factors shaping the production and marketing strategies, amidst a genuine shortage of ilala palm trees, the social dynamics that sustain the linkages between rural households and urban-commercial centres, and the social patterns that emerge as a result of them, are important in either arriving at a general understanding of their activities and for the sake of policy formulation. In situations where there are shortages of material that are important for the general well being of a population, authorities are known to invest much in resources and expertise, in order to improve their availability. In this situation more needs to be done to ensure the survival of the ilala palm tree and to work towards increasing its availability by producing a seed variety that can grow under more than one environmental condition, as well as work towards improving the aesthetic appeal of the indigenously grown products and their lasting capacity. Such efforts for instance, have become well known in periods such as the Green Revolution, when improved varieties of seeds for wheat and rice led to prosperous harvests in places such as the Punjab Province in India. Equally prosperous yields in milk occurred in the province of Gujarat during the "White Revolution", when capital and expertise was poured into the research of cows and their capacities to improve their milk output. Greater consideration of these issues in KwaZulu Natal are bound to transcend the limits of cultural knowledge and improve the production and marketing processes of indigenous efforts.

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