

# Handicrafts as an opportunity for economic development and sustainable tourism: Shkodra case study

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## ABSTRACT

**Keywords:**

*Handicrafts, Tradition,  
Shkodra Region,  
Sustainable Tourism,  
Economic Development*

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Albania is known for a very rich tradition of craftsmanship with precious values created during centuries by popular workman in every province considering features and specifications of different geographical areas and being prominent in their diversity. Although this profession is exercised almost by every woman, it was more distinguishable in some provinces such as provinces of Zadrima, Fushe-Kruje, the Shpat (Elbasan), and Myzeqe which already had established models and techniques regarding their own region. In its 2500-year-old history, the city of Shkodra has established tradition in the field of handicrafts which shows the individuality, creativity, imagination, feelings, and artistic tastes of this region. Handicrafts in Shkodra is an art, craft, and lifestyle and among the most popular works are the works of silver, textiles, carving, woodworking, and marble. One of the main development centers in Shkodra is Zadrima crafts. Artisan is one of the important points for the development of sustainable tourism in Shkodra but the development of handicrafts has encountered many problems including the lack of a specific market with adequate stores, lack of managers who deal with message delivery collection of products, and inability to find new markets at home and abroad. Development of handicrafts in Shkodra and their reality and perspectives are reflected in the present study. The results revealed that although artisans in Shkodra try hard to develop handicrafts but it needs a great support to move forward and compete with other countries.

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## Introduction

During the 2500-year-old history, the city of Shkoder created a tradition in the field of handicraft by passing down a high level of skill, individuality, creative fantasy, and the multitude of the artistic tastes of the area. The most prosperous time for the handicraft in this

city was from the half of the XVII century until the 50s/60s of the XIX century. By this time, Shkoder dominated the other centers of handicraft in the country with as many as 2500 shops in its great marketplace. The handicraft shops were arranged according to the eighty different trades. In these shops one could admire the skilled labor of the masters chiseling the stone into beautiful shapes, carving exquisite ornaments in the wood, shaping the iron, embellishing the folk costumes with impressive embroidery in golden and silver thread, processing all types of leather, and decorating the weapons of the freedom fighters. The diligent tailors and the talented embroidery artists would produce beautiful silken fabric bearing interesting motives and there you could find every form of handicrafts. People's recognition for the skills and the contribution of the trades related to the handicraft has been manifested in folk proverbs such as "A trade is a golden bracelet" (Leka & Dibra, 2007). As a matter of fact, handicraft in Shkoder is a trade, an art, and a way of living and the development of handicrafts in Shkodra and their reality and perspectives are reflected in the present study.

### **Handicraft development and some historic facts**

After the liberation in 1944, the handicraft was subjected to different forms of organization starting with the tradesmen cooperatives and finalizing with the foundation of the state-owned artistic handicraft enterprises where the best masters of the city came together. The quality of their products would compete even in the foreign markets. In the beginning of the 90s of the last century, during the transitional phase, as the country was introduced to the economy of the market, the production of the handicraft dropped drastically and struggled to survive in the entirely different new reality where everything had changed and the state-owned enterprises were dissolved. Nevertheless, the creative spirit could not be dissolved let alone extinguished. Such spirit managed to stay afloat through the rough waves of life and retrieve normality in the production of the handicraft. The market economy encouraged handicraft production and commerce. The increase of the population in the urban areas along with the customers' demand and the establishment and intensification of the relations with the other countries, stimulated the handicraft production. The new era brought about an evolution in the content, form, technology, and mechanism of the working process (Leka & Dibra, 2007).

Nowadays, in the city of Shkoder and its outskirts, there are many establishments of some of the finest arts of traditional handicraft. We could single out the processing of silver textiles, woodcarving, and marble chiseling. By making a good use of the rich tradition and the swelling customers' demand, such establishments produce items of a highly competitive and functional value. The new processing techniques, the motives of composition, the preparation of colors, and other factors being subjected, naturally adopt to the increasingly changing trends in the social life and the artistic preferences. Highlighting the actual situation of handicraft in Shkoder, giving priority to the values of the heritage and new concepts for the promotion of the handicraft products, the importance of developing the handicraft in the context of developing a stable tourism, appealing to the attention of all the stakeholders to support the development of the handicraft since it focuses on the preservation and the revival

of tradition in this field and it focuses on improving the employment of women and their household economies are the main purposes of the present study.

As an integral part of the material culture, handicraft in Shkoder has been focused on and blended with the traditional costumes and rites, religious superstitions, the folk tales and legends, the characteristics houses, and even the national dances by maintaining a strong bond with the geographical area where this population resides (Leka & Dibra, 2007). The majority of productions are handmade items of an artistic nature. In spite of the changes and the challenges of time, this form of art has survived as value worthy to be exposed. Nowadays handicraft has acquired broad dimensions in terms of the wide spectrum of artistic expressionism, as well as the variety of the finished products. This tradition contributed to the precious fund of values which coexists perfectly well with the modern trends in the context of Shkoder.

Everybody who had a chance to be acquainted to the trades of silver processing, textile, tapestry, woodcarving, embroidery, and masks produced in this area has appreciated the technical and artistic values. Traditional textile and apparel are important elements of material culture, and the decoration is equally important as part of the spiritual culture, so as folk art (Bido, 1991). They bear the seal of a city which distinguishes itself when it comes to style, motives, and techniques of production. It is not easy to choose from the impressive set of handicraft production of nowadays.

The region of Shkoder has the opportunity to choose a better model of development by orienting itself towards a stable tourism with a positive attitude to ecology and culture. In spite of many other activities that could be entertained in Shkoder, cultural tourism deserves special attention because it bears considerable and unique values (Leka & Dibra, 2007). The national strategy of tourism considers the cultural tourism as one of the fastest-growing markets of its kind in a global level. The cultural tourism has proven to be more profitable to the development than the massive tourism of the sand and sun.

The district of Shkoder is considered as the richest one in Albania as far as the handicraft activity is concerned (Leka & Dibra, 2007). Bearing in mind the growing number of foreign visitors in the region of Shkoder, the handicraft products constitute a very important tourist attraction. Considering the value of such products, several touristic agencies and restaurants signed long-term contracts with travel agencies to bring in as many tourists as possible. Recently, the municipality has started to turn its attention to the sector of the handicraft by organizing numerous outdoor fairs to give an opportunity to the tradesmen to promote their products.

### **Types of Handicraft**

There are several types of handicraft in the city of Shkoder. Hence, it is not easy to choose from this impressive range of handicraft productions. Nevertheless, the most outstanding ones are emphasized, which could easily boast a spot in the windows of the most reputable museums.

**Handicrafts Made of Stone**

Stone chiseling is part of the handicraft tradition in Shkoder. The “Rozafa” fortress, the bridge of Mes, the cobbled lanes, the chimneys, the towers and other objects are a living proof of the skillful hands of the Shkodra masters.

**Handicrafts Made of Metal**

The metallic handicrafts have turned the city of Shkoder into an interesting center with no shortage of masters skilled in working with metal. The silverwork is still present as a handicraft with a broad artistic and practical use. The silversmiths of Shkoder elevated it into an artistic decorative skill with folkloric and national features. They are especially famous for mastering the fine technique of filigree. The masters of silver in Shkoder employ techniques which date back to two thousand years ago and their works are 100% realized by hand. These products compete with dignity in every fair and fulfil the growing demand of the market.

**Handicrafts Made of Wood**

Since the ancient times, the art of working by wood gained particular importance and attention in terms of technique and forms. Depending on the type of wood, the carving technique and the decoration motives, the folk masters with their simple tools have embroidered the wood with a brilliant artistic sense. The motives of decoration rich in their artistic significance and composition rhythm are very interesting. Some of the most frequent products include small souvenir items, dowry chests, painting frames, mirror cases, ceilings, door frames, and windows. Such products are typical for the decoration of the traditional houses. There is no fair, national or international, where the wooden products and proof of the great artistic skills are not appreciated.

**Pyrography**

These wooden products which are entirely made by hand have great artistic values. They require a lot of fantasy and aesthetics. They contain images of the photographs of Marubi and motives suitable for the children rooms in the desired dimensions.

**Handicrafts Made of Textile**

The textiles in Shkoder convey a wide variety of artistic values and sentiments of the handicraft artists. The techniques applied for special weaving, looming, and thread coloring refer to many centuries ago. The trade of looming has been transmitted from one generation to the next and the traditional models have been proclaimed a national asset. The tablecloth is one of the finest products when it comes to sheer beauty and transparence. Most assuredly, nothing competes such as wonderful product. The embroideries are highly appreciated for their quality and their interesting motives. They tell the tale of the fine artistic sense of the women, evident in the different types of fabrics and techniques of textile processing.

**Handicrafts Made of Leather**

The trade of leather was one of the most developed ones since the VII century. These tradesmen would work with every kind of leather in different colors. They would produce

beautiful horse saddles, harnesses, ornamented whips, and hunting equipment which represent a part of the materialistic culture.

### **Handicrafts Made of Porcelain, Marble, and Clay**

The works of marble, porcelain, and clay in the city of Shkoder have been turned into an atelier art. Thanks to the increase in the demand of the domestic and foreign customers, the production has grown along with the variety of the products according to the preferences of the market.

### **Handicrafts Made of Willow**

The products made by weaving the willow branches are a very ancient tradition. Locally grown willow is used as a raw material and Shkoder is known as the main center of this trade. The use of the straw for artistic purposes was started in Bushat, in the district of Shkoder. Some of the most typical products involve baskets, chairs, tables, armchairs, and shelves which are suitable for exporting. The masters of this trade in Shkoder managed to preserve the tradition by enhancing it further and elevating it into an art in accordance to the demands of the times.

### **Working Masks**

Traditionally, in the city of Shkodra in the days of carnival, masks were prepared as simple motifs of the time. In recent years, masks products were evaluated and exquisite sense of beauty and high artistic taste stand out in particular forms of masks. Masks are present today not only in the days of the carnival, but also on holidays or masked balls organized in the city.

### **Zadrime, the Main Center of the Handicraft Development in Shkoder**

Zadrime, famous for the folk costumes, is one of the main centers of the development of handicraft. This tradition was preserved by many women who work at home to generate an income for their families. Considering the growing number of tourists visiting the region of Shkoder, these traditions represent an important attraction for them. A great part of the families which live in the area of Zadrime engage in handicraft activity and this trade is mostly exerted by women. This area is famous for the traditional costumes and the local textiles. The daily outfit of women in Zadrime used to be a long shirt, a black hind apron, and a checkered or striped front apron for the lower part of the body. In the upper part of the body, they would wear a simple vest that was more common among girls and women.

The outfit for a special occasion was a black long dress with many vertical folds (Gjergji, 1988). Their number and production increased through the years, which implied the competition in the market. They relied on the implementation of the projects supported by different donors by participating in fairs and trainings. One of the most successful organizations is the Association of the Albanian Handicraft in the center of Shkoder. This association assists the tradesmen to promote their products and helps them to participate in the national and local fairs organized in Albania. In the area of Zadrime, there are 100 girls and women that are involved in this activity and 57% of them are in the Gur i Zi commune.

Many handicraft workshops have been built in the area of Zadrime, but the biggest one is situated in Rragam. The lady who started this activity knew the trade because it was transmitted to her from previous generations. She managed to expand the activity each year and now there are over 20 girls and women working for her on a regular basis. Some of the products of this workshop are handbags, curtains, scarves, and traditional costumes and the decoration consists of old folk motives. The products are a combination between the traditional and the modern patterns. The slogan of this workshop is formation, employment, and socialization. In the area of Zadrime, they have focused also on the process of branding the products. This is a very important step in developing the business because branded products contribute to the sense of security of the tourists regarding the quality of the product. Many ideas were presented initially for the name of brand and they decided on ZAHOTEX (Zadrime Homemade Textile).

### **Research Hypothesis**

The following research hypothesis guided the study.

**H<sub>0</sub>:** The support for the preservation and the development of the handicraft creates opportunities for economic growth and it serves to the development of stable tourism.

### **Method**

Thirty questionnaires were distributed around the handicraft tradesmen in Shkoder. The questionnaire had a high rate of inspection and a low rate of discretion. All the handicraft tradesmen gave a positive answer (100%) to the question: "Do you think that handicraft is an important factor for the development of tourism in Shkoder?" The reason is that this is one of the main pillars to promote cultural tourism in Shkoder.

### **Results**

#### **SWOT Analysis**

##### **Strengths**

Shkodra is considered as the richest district as far as the handicraft products are concerned. Also, there was great opportunity to implement a wide variety of handicraft in Shkoder. Following these, appropriate space for the development of the cultural tourism and the foundation of the Albanian Handicraft Association are among the greatest strengths.

##### **Weaknesses**

Regarding the results, some weaknesses can be mentioned including shortage in the souvenir products, lack of diversity in the offered products, lack of appropriate packing, and poor promotion and advertisement of the products.

##### **Opportunities**

Opportunities involve the inheritance of the trade from one generation to the next, organization and participation in many national and international fairs, growing interest of tourists to visit Shkoder, development of the handicraft as an opportunity of employment, and high appreciation shown by the tourist especially the foreign ones for the products.

### Threats

The competition by foreign products is a serious threat. Low income, lack of a trade center dedicated to marketing these products, and the lack of training courses for the handicraft aspiring tradesmen are other threats. Finally, the handicraft tradesmen do not have enough personal capacities to tackle the challenges of the market.

Figure 1 shows the promote of handicrafts in Shkodra. The majority of the target group (54%) thought that besides the organization of occasional fairs in Shkoder, not much is being done to promote it.

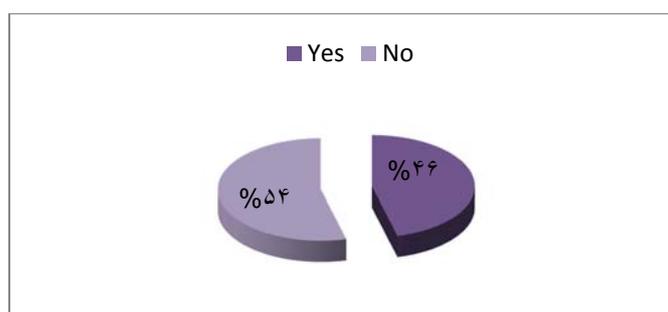


Figure 1. Promote of handicrafts in Shkodra

Figure 2 presents participation in fair abroad. Following this, the majority of the target group (63%), participated individually in fairs which organized abroad. They reported that the Albanian products were much appreciated in abroad and high quality was considered as their strongest point.

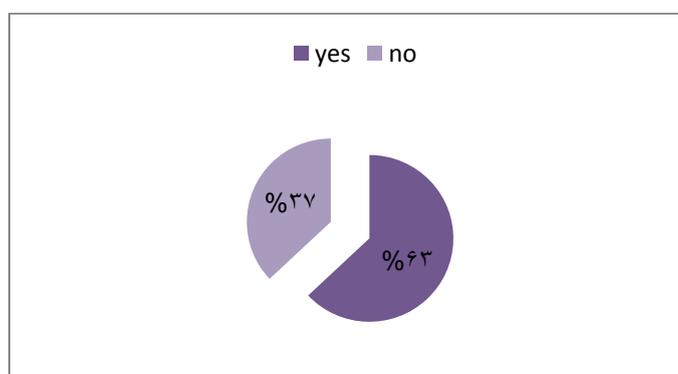


Figure 2. Participation in fair abroad

Figure 3 represents the rate of products. According to Figure 3, the popularity rate of products was average (56%) for a series of factors, but the main fact is that the product was not offered under a certified brand which greatly affected their packaging. When the participants were asked about the most emergent necessities to support their business, the answers varied greatly because the handicraft production had a lot of necessities. Nevertheless, the majority identified a series of items as major problems, namely the lack of a certified brand which affects the labeling process, the lack of a specific trade center dedicated to their products, and the lack of professional training to generate more innovative products on a traditional basis.

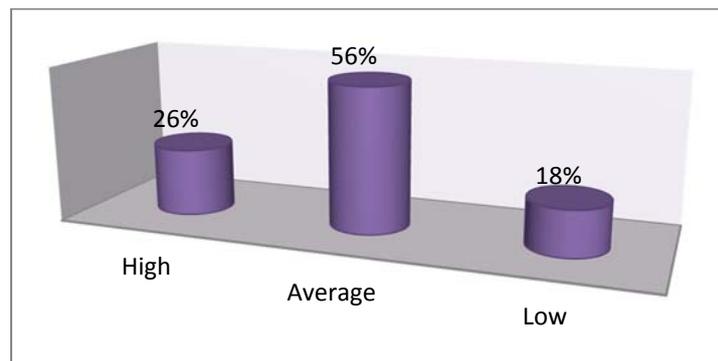


Figure 3. The rate of products

There was also a direct question concerning the rate that such activity contributes to the economic situation of their families. Following this, 60% reported that the income they generate from this activity is the main source of their economy and 53% reported that the income is average, yet satisfactory. Artisans (73%) generally indicated that this craft inherit to the future generations and by supporting this craft, it can turn to a highly profitable trading opportunity.

The demand for handicraft products has increased in the recent years. Many of the target group reported that their activity has expanded because the awareness of people on the value of such unique products has increased. It is generally the women who commit themselves to the handicraft activity, especially in the area of Zadrime. This can also be noticed in the results of the questionnaire. It can be noticed that, 57% of the people working in this profile were women and 46% of them were over their forties. One of the weaknesses identified by the tradesmen was the lack of proper promotion for their products. The only way of promotion according to them was the publication of leaflets (64%) and the web pages (36%).

### Discussion and Conclusion

Even though the tradesmen put a great effort to develop the handicraft, the traditions in Zadrime are at a serious danger of going extinct because of the low profit. The handicraft outdoor fairs that have been organized in the city of Shkoder recently, have had a positive effect in the promotion of the values of such products, as well as in establishing business relations between the tradesmen and the people who have an interest in this type of market. However, the handicraft tradesmen encounter a lot of difficulties, the greatest of which concern their activity. The lack of possibility to invest in terms of expanding their business, lack of a specific marketplace dedicated to handicraft, lack of commercial managers who would take care of wholesale orders and distribution, and the difficulty to identify new markets in Albania and abroad are some of these problems. It is difficult for the women of Zadrime to find a suitable market for their products. They try to sell in an informal marketplace in Shkoder and as a result of the poor merchandize arrangement conditions, it is impossible to advertise their product well. To this end, the value of their product drops.

The scarce purchase power of the Albanian families has practically triggered the import of textiles from Asia, especially China. The Albanian tourists and the immigrants in general,

demand authentic Albanian products. In spite of the numerous difficulties that come across the handicraft tradesmen in the North of the country, they still feel a great sense of satisfaction because they managed to preserve the tradition of handicraft production. In the area of Shkoder, the beginnings of this tradition can be traced in the half of the XVIII century. Therefore, the applied techniques and motives will evolve further and they will never die. Handicraft is an important aspect for the development of stable tourism in Shkoder. The majority of the handicraft tradesmen rely on their trade as the sole source of income to support their families.

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