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# Weaving Art and Development With Fair Trade

by Greg Coyle



**Above:** Weavers of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, favor bright colors in their work. *Courtesy of Baskets of Africa* **Right:** Newspaper is first rolled before being woven into baskets. *Courtesy of La Vida Verde*

**B**en Makhanya is proud of his work. It is easy to see why. His baskets are not only striking works of art, they have also helped to dramatically improve his life and that of his wife and four children.

Called *mbenge*, Makhanya's bright, often intricately designed baskets rely not on native plants and grasses, use of which the Zulu of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa have long been famed for, but a new, more modern medium: telephone wire. Said to have started with security workers in the factories of South Africa weaving the wire around their nightsticks, the technique is masterfully reimagined in Makhanya's 16-inch-diameter bowls. Drawing inspiration from his environment, and loving to experiment with design and color, Makhanya's work is both eye catching and functional. His only challenge? Securing customers.

## Connecting artisan and buyer

Cael Chappell began Baskets of Africa in 2002 in an effort to help artisans like Makhanya find a market for their products and thus improve their income and their life. It was a commitment that he began shaping almost 20 years ago.

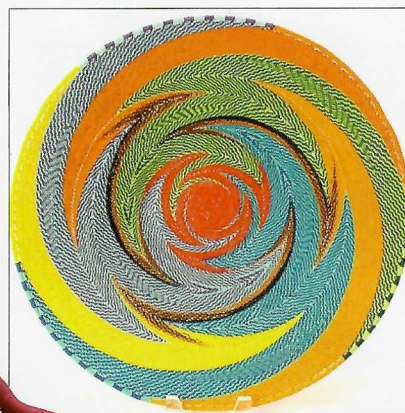
"When I was 19 I started working for a company that dealt with African art from Zimbabwe," Chappell says. "But I wanted to start my own company







**Left:** Weavers of Khumbulani Crafts in Zululand make traditional Zulu baskets. *Courtesy of Tex Dworkin, Global Exchange*



**Above:** Zulu weaver Ben Makhanya's 16-inch shallow bowl. *Courtesy of Baskets of Africa* **Left:** A pine needle basket can take up to a week to complete. *Courtesy of La Vida Verde* **Below:** Two Zulu artisans weave "telephone" wire baskets. *Courtesy of Baskets of Africa*

so that I could work in more countries, help more people, throughout all of Africa."

Today, Baskets of Africa is doing just that, partnering with more than 20 weavers across the continent from Ghana to South Africa to bring a dizzying array of basket styles and colors to a global market.

"This is my dream to work with African weavers," Chappell shares. "It's important as an income source but also extremely important as a means to preserve their cultural heritage and their abilities to live traditional lives."

For his part, Makhanya, whose previous work as a bricklayer required him to leave home for long stretches, came to weaving as a means for keeping his family together. He is now home full time and is able to pay all of his family expenses, including school fees for his children. He has even built and furnished a new home.

### Making use of resources

Like Baskets of Africa, La Vida Verde is devoted to connecting its weaver partners with the marketplace, while helping them promote their culture through their art. Kris and Michael Barker, both former schoolteachers, were inspired to start their Latin America-focused company after a trip to Costa Rica in 1992.

Adding baskets to their catalog in 1999, La Vida Verde now offers two varieties, both manufactured in Nicaragua. The first is hand woven from pine needles, delicate





"Unlike other companies who may have a partial or no commitment to fair trade, FTF members have fair trade at the heart of what they do," adds Carmen Iezzi, executive director of FTF. "They know that this system is a highly effective way to help producers help themselves."

Abby Edelman, director of the Global Exchange Fair Trade Online Store, puts it like this, "Fair trade is also about community development. Through direct trading relationships, artisans earn a greater income. They can then make the important decisions about what to invest in within their communities, be it health, education or infrastructure development."

Global Exchange has been an advocate of fair trade practices for more than 20 years. As part of its promotion and support of human rights causes around the globe, the company works closely with basket weavers from many cultures to bring their work to a wider audience.

The company is, for example, one of the only organizations working with the women of Darfur in Sudan to bring their baskets and their story of survival to customers.

Employing indigenous designs and techniques, the brightly colored baskets are hand woven using palm grass and natural dyes. Sale of the baskets, it is hoped, will enable the artisans to make some much-needed income, while helping sustain threatened cultural traditions.

## Looking to the future

This commitment to treating business as a tool for moving people forward is making a difference with struggling artisans around the planet. Baskets of Africa's Ben Makhanya has seen his life improve a great deal. He is happy to have a chance to share his art with the rest of the world.

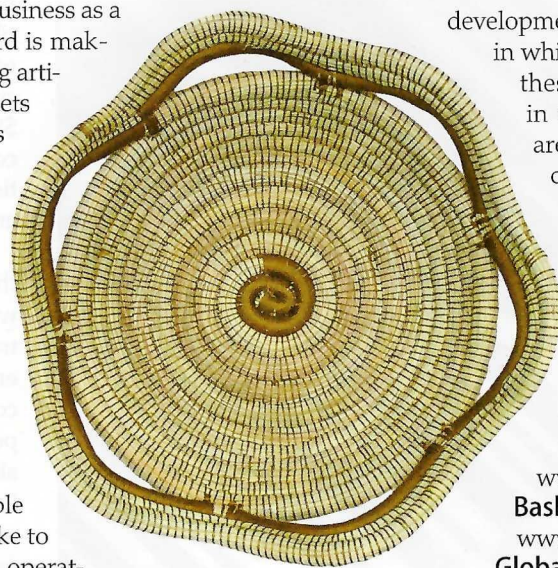
"I am a man working in humble conditions in Africa being supported by people from across the world," Makhanya notes. "I am proud to know that people from a place so far away appreciate my work."

It is this sensitivity for people and cultures that FTF would like to one day see become standard operating procedure for all companies.

"It's not about charity," Iezzi says. "It's a holistic approach to trade and



**Above:** Zulu products woven from coated wire. *Courtesy of Baskets of Africa* **Left:** A unique element is added to traditional basket design. *Courtesy of La Vida Verde* **Below:** Newspaper baskets made from recycled paper. *Courtesy of La Vida Verde*



Pine needle baskets are woven in a variety of styles and shapes. *Courtesy of La Vida Verde*

development that aims to alter the ways in which commerce is conducted. As these companies support growth in their own communities, they are also supporting growth in communities worldwide."

## Additional information

To learn more about fair trade, FTF and the other organizations profiled here, see the websites below:

### Fair Trade Federation:

[www.fairtradefederation.org](http://www.fairtradefederation.org)

### Baskets of Africa:

[www.basketsofafrica.com](http://www.basketsofafrica.com)

### Global Exchange:

[www.globalexchangestore.org](http://www.globalexchangestore.org)

### La Vida Verde:

[www.lavidaverde.com](http://www.lavidaverde.com)<sup>TCR</sup>