Place-Based Development of Egypt's Handicraft Clusters

A Review of al-Darb al-Ahmar Cluster in Historic Cairo

March 2023

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The report has been developed within the project "Establishing research links to support the digital transformation of Egypt's handicraft industries" funded by the British Council Grant Agreement No. 871072737 which took place between January 2022 and March 2023. This project addresses Egypt's needs of promoting economic development and social welfare within strategic industries, in particular creative and handicraft industries which are under threat by mass production and the loss of traditional know-how.

The project was carried out by a consortium involving Dr. Karina Rodriguez Echavarria and Dr. Myrsini Samaroudi at the University of Brighton, Dr. Omniya Abdel Barr, Abdelhamid Salah, Nesreen Sharara, Noha Ali, Abdelrahman Aboulfadl, Sahar Sakkout and Jane Smythe at the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation, as well as Prof. Tim Weyrich at the University College London and the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU).

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Contents

1. Executive Summary

This report aims to identify strategies to foster the sustainable development and support the digital transformation of the handicraft industries in Egypt. In particular, the report presents the interdisciplinary research co-developed during the project, its methodology and findings of the current state of the craft cluster al-Darb al-Ahmar in the historic centre of Cairo. The methodology used for the research includes desk-based research and a business survey with a sample of 30 micro- and small- enterprises or workshops which were interviewed during the period of September to December 2022.

The survey included a range of close and open-ended questions to identify the existing capabilities, challenges, and opportunities, including their capacity in the design and manufacturing of products, their efforts towards knowledge transmission, their state of digital literacy as well as their financial sustainability.

The report concludes with a set of recommendations which aim to safeguard and enhance traditional woodwork crafts, build capacity within makers and workshops and shape a sustainable future for traditional woodwork crafts in the area of al-Darb al-Ahmar in Cairo and beyond. In particular, it highlights the need for 1) a place-based innovation investment strategy, 2) recognition of 'artisans' and the value of the craft, 3) the development of skills and capacity building to underpin innovation, and 4) a mixed strategy which involves the documentation of the craft and investment to prevent the disappearance of key handicraft industries. Our intention is to contribute towards addressing these needs to foster this key industry which represents, amongst others, the cultural heritage and history of Egypt.

2. Introduction

Egyptian heritage is reflected in Egyptian handicrafts, the history of which can be traced back hundreds of thousands of years, from the pharaonic, Coptic, and Islamic eras. The traditional Egyptian crafts, some of which are recognised under the UNESCO intangible heritage list[1], involve woven fabric, pottery, wood, glass, copper, carpets, leather, stone, palm stalks, calligraphy, and jewellery, all of which are considered faithful expressions of Egyptian culture and of the communities that produce them. Craftsmen/women are often inspired by their heritage and can innovate, design, and implement original creative products with heritage motifs and ornamentation reflecting the country's rich cultural heritage.

Within Egypt, the handicrafts sector is characterised by many organic handicraft clusters, where the clusters are defined by a type of craft and a geographical area, bringing together groups of at least 10 micros, small or medium enterprises involved in the production of similar or complementary products. Referred to in Arabic as "hara", crafts and creative clusters were one of the most distinguished and dominant types of activities in Egypt (El-Habashi et al. 2022).

Many clusters are increasingly facing challenges, such as difficulty in sourcing quality raw materials, innovating in design, and the unavailability of skilled labour, meaning that they are struggling. A minority of workshops can be described as energetic clusters that compete well in the market. An example of a success story is Tunis village in Fayoum where its pottery cluster helped in the development of the village and turned the village into a tourist destination.

According to El-Habashi et al. (2022), regeneration through the re-clustering of existing handicraft workshops could provide social, cultural, and economic benefits building on the historical identity and values of these communities. As demonstrated by international efforts, political, social, and economic inequalities can be substantially addressed when communities can be supported through initiatives that reinforce their sense of identity and belonging.

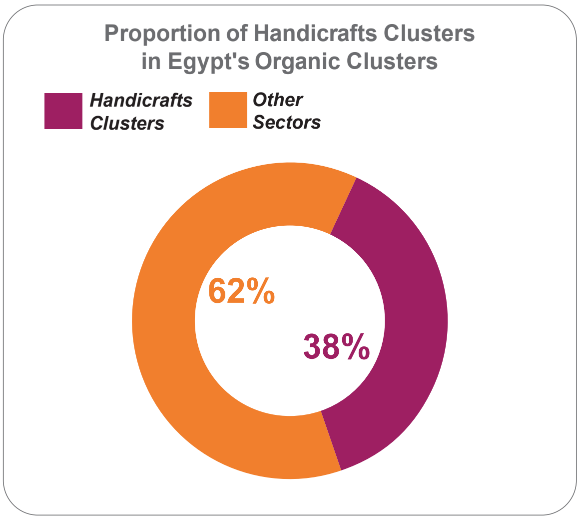
Despite ongoing efforts to regenerate this sector, there is still a lack of place-based and evidence-based research which identifies the needs, challenges and opportunities for introducing interventions within the sector. Thus, this report presents independent evidence of the handicraft sector in Historic Cairo.

The following sections, present the methodology and findings of the research, as well as an analysis of the current state of the craft clusters in Historic Cairo.

1 https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/egypt-EG?info=elements-on-the-lists

3. Background and Context

Artistic and creative industries are significant because their goods signify the distinctiveness of their countries and their people. Egypt has about 145 industrial clusters, 91 of which are creative clusters representing about 62% of total clusters (Ministry Of Trade & Industry 2018). These creative clusters, whose geographical representation is presented in Figure 1, include crafts such as handmade pottery, glass, carpet, textiles, alabaster, wood, copper, and jewellery. Some crafts exist only in Egypt such as the pottery of el Nazla village in Fayoum, Marmar of Luxor governorate, and Khayamya in *al-Darb al-Ahmar*.



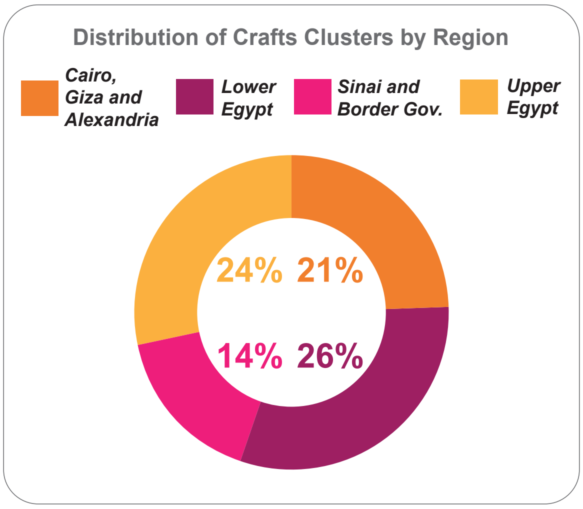


Figure 1. The proportion of handicraft clusters and percentage of clusters in different regions of Cairo (Ministry Of Trade & Industry 2018)

According to the Ministry Of Trade & Industry (2018), the main priority for the period between 2018 and 2025 is the simultaneous strengthening of the local handicrafts and developing the export market. This includes supporting the basic institutional and operational infrastructure of the sector while at the same time creating awareness and recognition of Egypt as a supplier of quality products in the international market. For 2030, Egypt's vision is to be one of the top global centres for handicraft production and exports through building competitive, sustainable, inclusive value chains together with superior design capabilities inspired by its unique multicultural identity and rich historic legacy.

Despite the challenges around estimating the number of people employed in this sector, it is estimated that up to 2 million craftspeople work in this sector (Ministry Of Trade & Industry 2018). The sector supports unemployment mostly in the rural area and it helps provide employment opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

3.1. Methodology

This research investigates the needs, challenges and opportunities perceived by the handicraft sector to achieve 2030's vision, in particular, amongst craftspeople. Other research has already highlighted challenges, such as a lack of coordination amongst development organizations; poor access to markets and business models; poor skills and opportunities; low income and high vulnerability of artisans and weak regulations. To delve better into these aspects, we reviewed the wood-making cluster in al-Darb al-Ahmar, one of the oldest districts in Historic Cairo, as a sample of the handicraft clusters in this geographical area (see Figure 3).

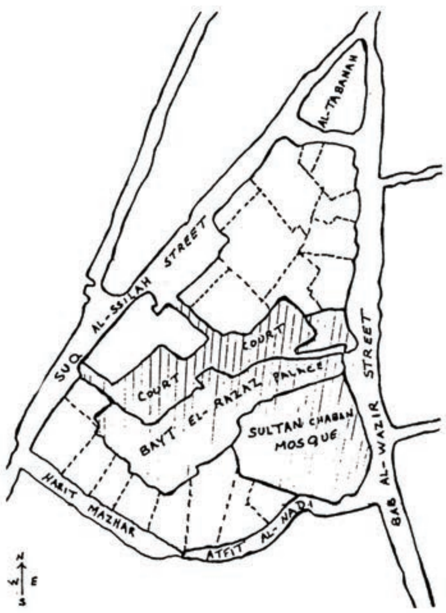


Figure 2. Darb El Ahmar kism (Fakhouri 1985)

For more context, Cairo consists of twenty-six kism (districts); each district is divided into several shiyakha. al-Darb al-Ahmar kism has fifteen shiyakha. It contains many small-scale handicraft industries and commercial outlets where skilled workers engage in different types of skills and craft industries, such as leather and woodwork, the manufacturing of furniture, and the production of a variety of metal and embroidery items for the tourist industry. This area still preserves many of its mediaeval characteristics despite its historical and cultural decline which has been accelerated by the high population density, traffic congestion and an inefficient delivery system for basic amenities according to Fakhouri (1985).

The study aimed to survey woodwork handicraft workshops in the cluster in al-Darb al-Ahmar; hence, we focused on workshops which produce furniture, home accessories, doors, windows, panels and related products. These products usually involve crafts such as woodwork, and ornamental woodwork including inlay, carving, Arabic joinery, veneer, and wood turning as well as various finishing and painting crafts such as gilding.

The methodology used for the research includes desk-based research and a business survey with a sample of 30 micro- and small- enterprises or workshops which were interviewed during the period of September to December 2022. The survey included a range of close and open-ended questions to identify the existing capabilities, challenges, and opportunities, including their capacity in the design and manufacturing of products, their efforts towards knowledge transmission, their state of digital literacy as well as their financial sustainability. The responses were statistically analysed and clustered into themes based on a SWOT analysis from which various trends emerged. Findings and recommendations were elicited from this data.

4. Findings

This section looks at the data gathered in a survey of workshops in the historic area of al-Darb al-Ahmar.

4.1. Findings: Profile of Workshops

The survey revealed that workshops in this area have been established since the 1950s with a slight increase of workshops created in the decades of the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s (as shown in Figure 3, a total of 80% of workshops were established since the 1990s).

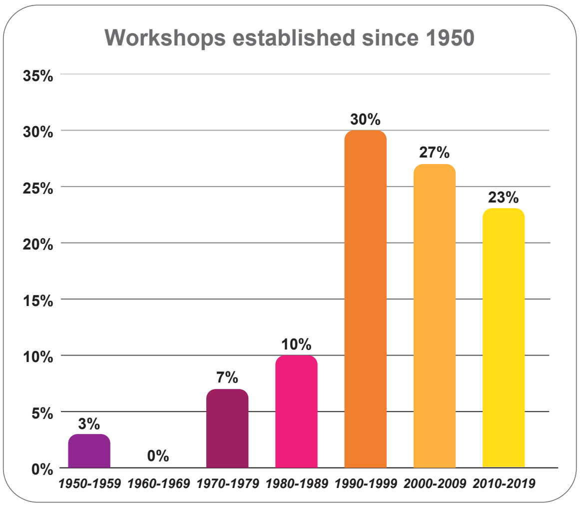


Figure 3. Decades in which the workshops were established.

These workshops usually employ between 1-4 full-time skilled workers. According to the data, 2 full-time skilled workers per workshop is more common (see Figure 4). These full-time workers are usually augmented by seasonal workers ranging from 1 to 6 workers. According to the data, 2 seasonal skilled workers per workshop is common (see Figure 5).

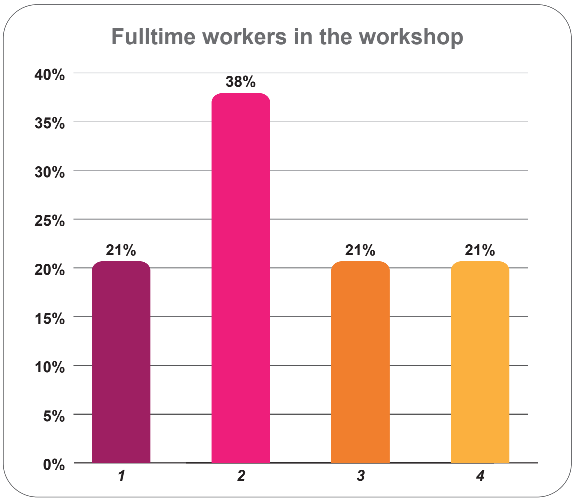


Figure 4. Number of full time workers in the workshop.

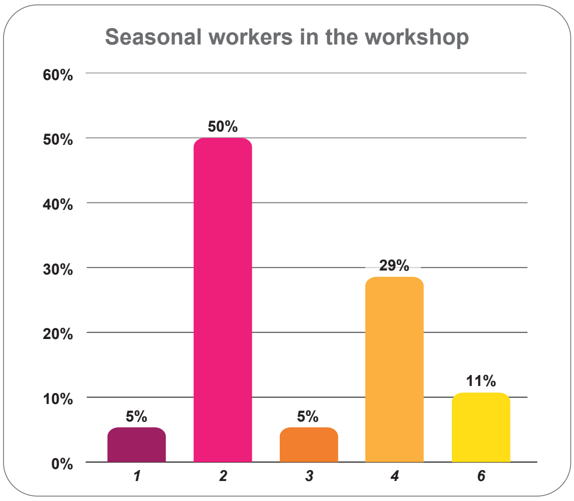


Figure 5. The number of seasonal workers in the workshop.

The ages of the workshops' lead artisan range from their early 20s, with the youngest being 24 years old, to their 60s, and the oldest being 68 years old. As illustrated in Figure 6, a majority of lead workers are over their 40s with almost 37% of the workshops' lead workers being between 30-39 years old. Age will have a significant impact on the level of adoption of digital technologies within workshops, an aspect which will be touched upon later in the analysis.

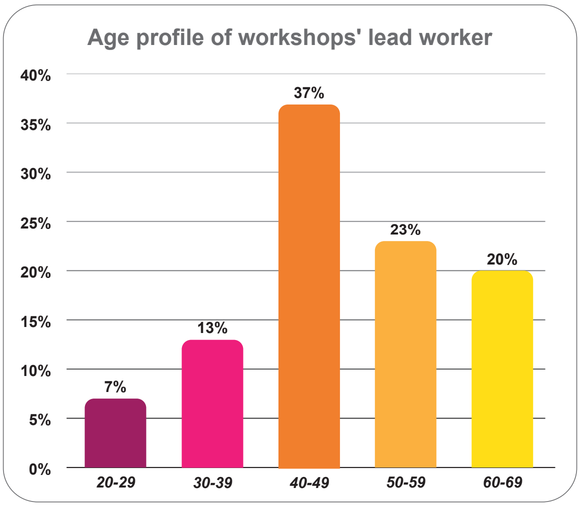


Figure 6. Workshops' lead worker's age.

With regards to education, there is a higher percentage of lead workers who attended a technical school (33%), as well as lead workers who have only attended primary education (20%). Other lead workers display various levels of education from no education at all (13%) to having completed a University education (16%) as shown in Figure 7.

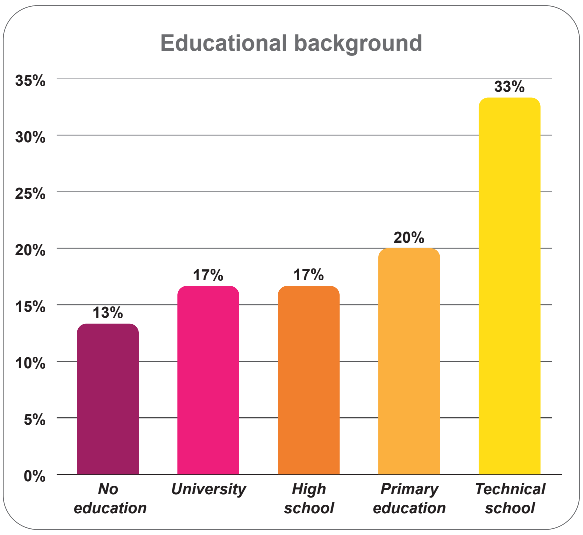


Figure 7. Lead worker's education background.

Based on other studies in this sector (Creative Scotland 2012), in this research, we deployed profiles based on the levels of craft education and whether the craft is the main workshop of workers, to understand the profile of skilled artisans in Egypt. These profiles classify craftspeople according to two criteria: having higher education craft qualifications and taking on craft-making as a first career. Based on this four distinct groups emerge:

1. *Craft careerists*: committed to the idea of craft as a career, they move to start their workshops shortly after finishing their first (or second) degrees in craft-related subjects.

2. *Artisans*: do not have academic degrees in the subject but nevertheless have made craft their first career.

3. *Returners*: makers who trained in art, craft or design, but who followed another career path before 'returning' to craft later on.

4. *Career changers*: begin their working lives in other careers before taking up craft as a profession, often in mid-life.

The survey confirmed that there is a large pool of skilled *artisans* whose knowledge of mastering crafts is passed through generations. In many cases, traditional knowledge which is held by these artisans is under threat of being lost due to a number of threats. One of the major identified threats has been cheap mass production and its worldwide spread since the previous century. Yet, more threats have emerged, such as climate change and natural resources degradation, leading to crafting communities' weakening or displacement; pandemics, like Covid-19, preventing crafters from accessing markets to ensure income, as well as accentuating health inequalities affecting the ageing population of crafters both in terms of physical disappearance and in terms of a cultural threat, as the elder decease without ensuring intergenerational "transmission" of knowledge (UNESCO, 2020a; 2020b).

Interestingly though, young and educated startup *craft careerists* are increasingly entering the sector trying to bridge the finance, design, quality, and marketing gaps by successfully collaborating with artisans to produce contemporary products.

As this survey reveals, only 17% can be identified within the *craft careerist* category, with the majority (83%) being identified within the *artisan* category. In addition, all workshops identified that their craft activity is the sole income generation activity, evidencing how crucial the income from craft is for the survival and welfare of craftspeople as well as their communities. Hence, the categorisation previously introduced is presented in Figure 8 for the workshops in the al-Darb al-Ahmar.

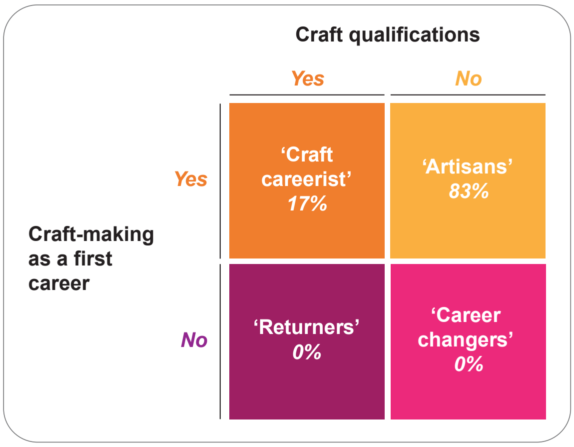


Figure 8. Profile of the crafters in the kism of al-Darb al-Ahmar in Historic Cairo

4.2. Findings: Product Information and Quality Control

The workshops that were surveyed specialise in various products, with the majority designing and producing furniture (77%), followed by home accessories (33%), as well as doors/windows and panels (see Figure 9). Other products which were mentioned included instruments, including drums, kitchens and antiques. Overall, the majority of workshops recognised furniture as the most important product that they make, with this type of product constituting between 75-100% of the products they sell as illustrated in Figure 10.

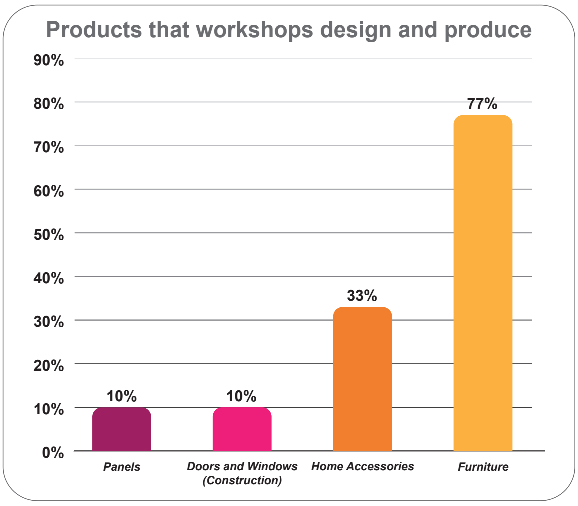


Figure 9. Products that workshops design and produce.

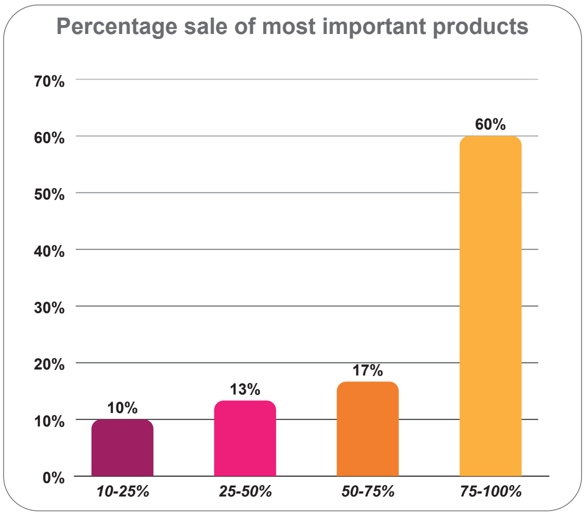


Figure 10. Sold percentage of the most important products produced by the workshops. The type of product which this percentage represents varies depending on the workshop.

The craft that workshops employ for their products is general woodworking techniques (33%), further 30% specialise in inlay, 17% in carving, 10% in Arabic joinery, 7% in textiles and finishing/painting, and 3% in laser

cutting and woodturning (see Figure 11).

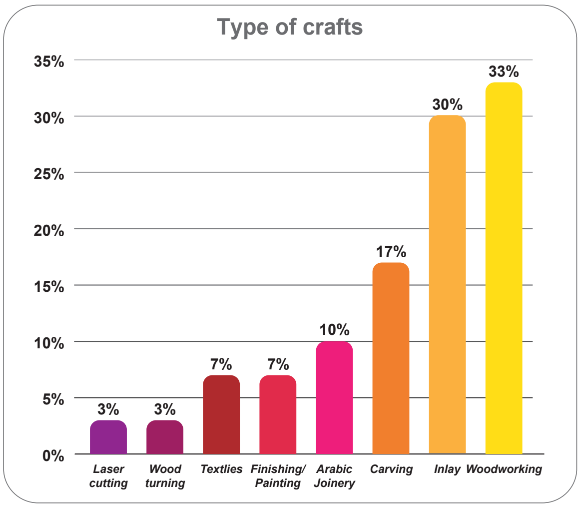


Figure 11. Type of craft the workshops employ for their products.

When asked about the product development process, 80% of the workshops highlighted they undertake the design of their products (see Figure 12).

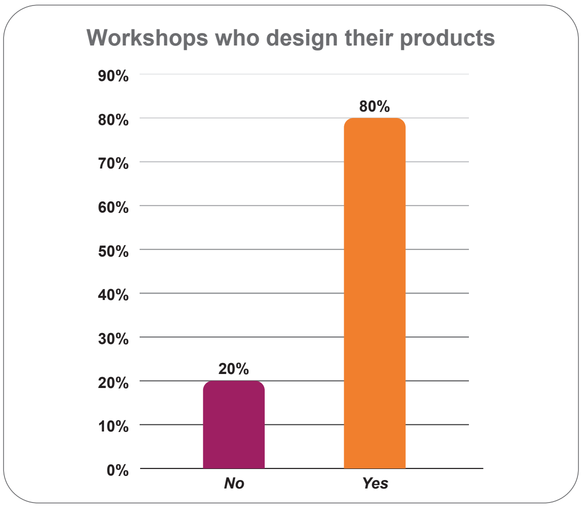


Figure 12. Workshops which offer design services in addition to the production of products within their product development cycle.

Regarding how often new designs are introduced, answers varied with 25% introducing new designs every year while others range from 3 days to an on-demand introduction of new designs, demonstrating overall rich developments and renewal of design 'vocabularies' in the domain (see Figure 13).

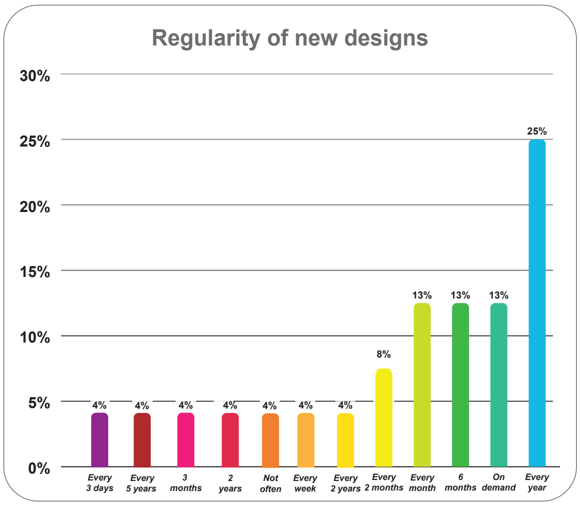


Figure 13. Regularity on which the workshops introduce new designs.

4.3. Findings: Production Capacity

When looking at production output, 80% of the workshops produced and sold less than 20 pieces in the last 3 months (see Figure 14). 10% of the workshops produced more than 80 pieces in the last three months and some of their products include home accessories and instruments. Although, less than this 10% of these workshops sold more than 80 pieces in the last 3 months with only 7% reporting this number. It must be noted that some of these workshops that sell more than 80 pieces reported not undertaking the design of their products, which indicates that they focus mostly on the production process allowing them to increase their output capacity.

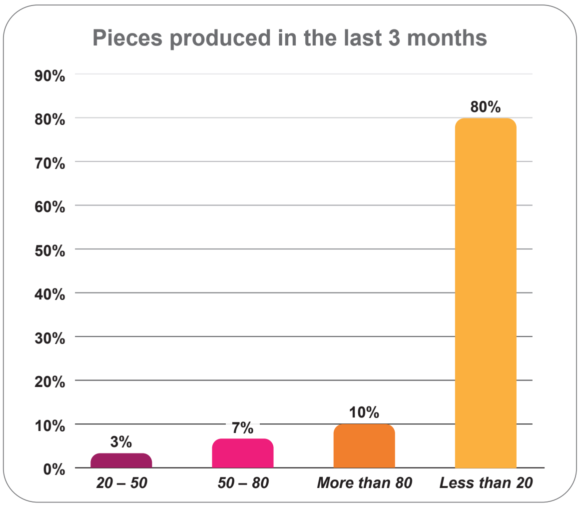


Figure 14. Number of pieces produced in the last 3 months at the time when the survey took place.

Woodwork products are usually sold via indirect methods, for instance in 67% of the cases products are sold as part of a supply chain, while 57% of the workshops sell directly to clients (see Figure 15). Those who sell directly offer products such as furniture, e.g. chairs, dining sets, living room sets, kitchen furniture, bedroom furniture, frames, boxes, consoles, tables, chairs, paravan/room dividers, trays, women's bags and laser services.

Furthermore, 63% of the workshops sell through a local mediator as illustrated in Figure 16. Reasons for using a mediator include:

- Problems reaching customers directly, e.g. in the case of international customers
- Not having a gallery to display products
- Accessing furniture stores merchants
- Lack of knowledge of the customer/market needs
- Lack of knowledge of marketing/selling products
- Not having any other option to market/sell

All these responses reflect the lack of access to markets, as well as the need to build capacity in the domain of market reach for workshops and makers who do not necessarily possess the skills to expand their workshop to enable higher market share.

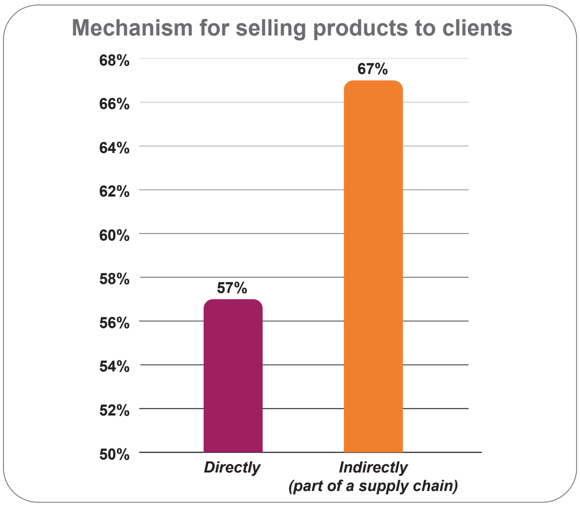


Figure 15. Most popular mechanisms for selling products to clients. Note that workshops might use more than one mechanism.

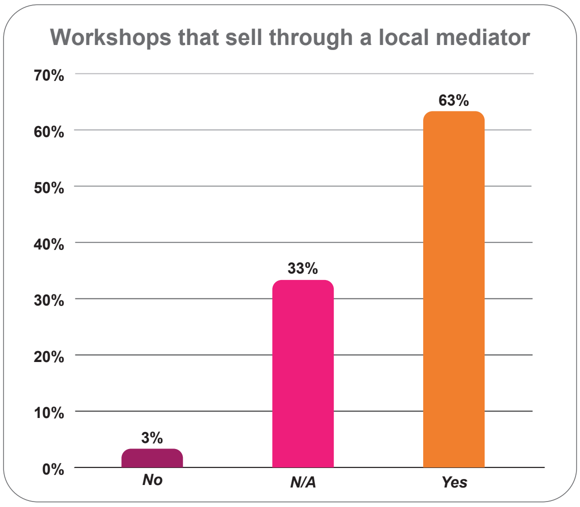


Figure 16. Workshops that sell through a local mediator.

Regarding the types of clients, 53% of the workshops have clients via gallery owners, including showrooms for furniture and home accessories, with a 30% having individual customers, and a further 30% selling to designers, including interior designers. Notably, only 3% sell products to tourists, although it is possible that tourists buy products indirectly through mediators or merchants (see Figure 17).

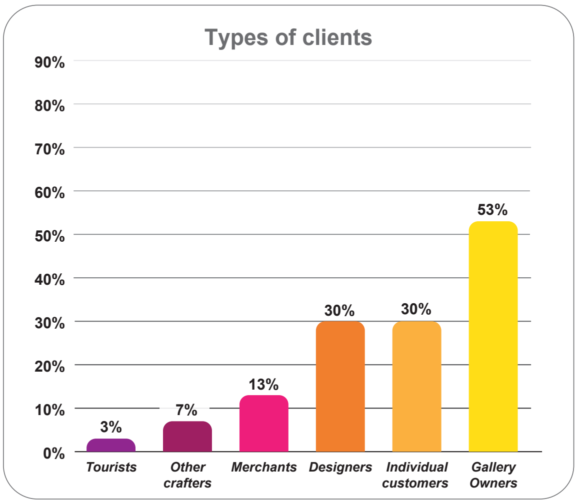


Figure 17. Types of clients that workshops have. Note that workshops might have more than one type of client.

Furthermore, 53% sell products at the workshop, while 30% use tourist shops, 20% galleries and 17% local craft fairs. Only 7% make use of online platforms for selling products as shown in Figure 18.

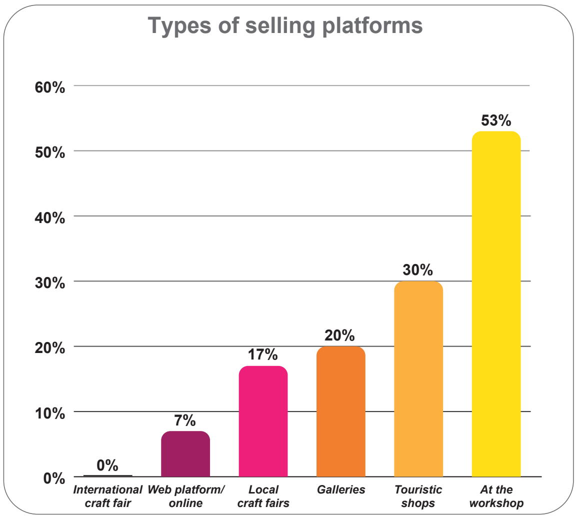


Figure 18. Types of venues or platforms that are used by the workshops to sell their products. Note that workshops might use more than one type of platform.

Moreover, all workshops surveyed identified that their current production capacity compared to previous years is decreasing. As Figure 19 shows, 83% of the workshops think the market is not so good, and that they will probably not survive in the next 10 years. Reasons for this include mostly the expensive raw materials and the challenging market. Workshops highlighted the need for new markets, including tourists and customers, as well as for new platforms, such as local and international exhibitions, for reaching these markets. The workshop also highlighted the threat to the knowledge of craft itself, as this is disappearing.

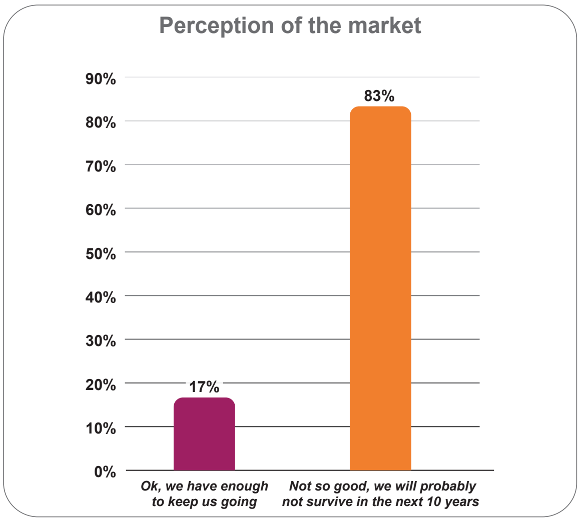


Figure 19. Opinion on the current state of the market for handicraft industries.

4.4. Finding: Knowledge Transfer

As shown in Figure 20, the survey found that 73% of the respondents think the knowledge of a craft or the craft itself is at risk of being lost. Despite this, only 47% of workshops undertake any form of knowledge transfer,

highlighting the challenge of preserving the skills and knowledge for future generations (see Figure 21).

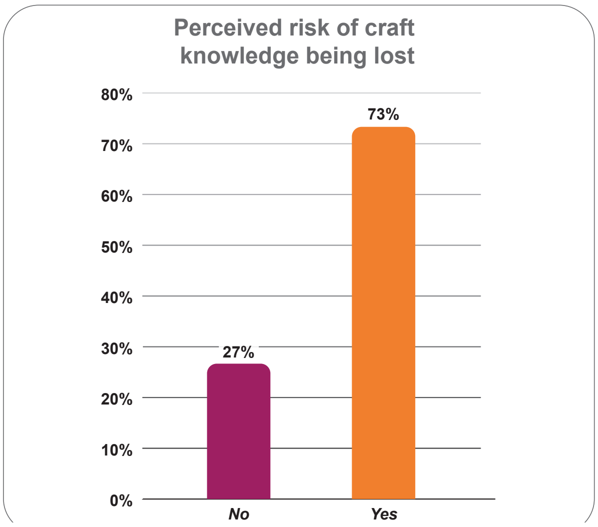


Figure 20. Workshops' opinions on the risk of the knowledge of craft or the craft itself being lost.

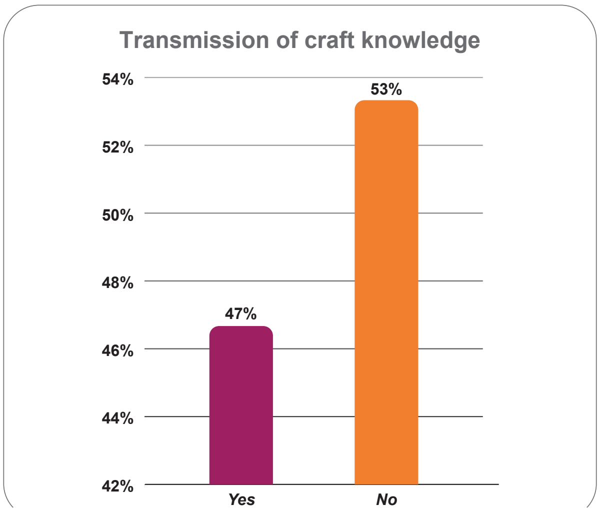


Figure 21. Workshops which engage in transmitting the knowledge of craft.

Of those workshops that engage in knowledge transfer, all of them undertake some form of apprenticeship, with a minority engaging in formal or informal training, evidencing a 'gap' between traditional skills transfer and structured pathways to safeguard and assist with knowledge transmission (see Figure 22).

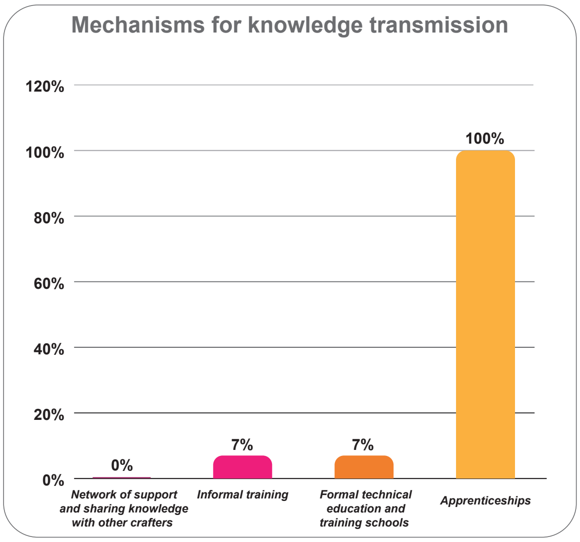


Figure 22. Mechanisms used by the workshops to transmit the knowledge of craft to others. Note that workshops might use more than one mechanism.

For those workshops, who think that the craft is at risk, the following challenges were ranked from the most challenging to the least challenging (we use a measure from 1-10 to specify the ranking):

- Lack of marketing and publicity opportunities (7.9)
- Unaffordable materials and rent in this area (6.7)
- Challenge of reaching out to new clients (creating

new markets) (3.9)

- Inability to create a product that suits the need of the market (0.6)

Again, such findings highlight the need to ensure the viability of the craft by generating more income through wider market/clientele reach, while also overcoming difficulties related to materials affordability and capacity to follow market trends.

4.5. Findings: Branding, Promotion and Marketing

With regards to activities that workshops think could help buyers to recognize the quality and originality of your products, they ranked from the most helpful to the least helpful (we use a measure from 1-10 to specify the average ranking):

- Social media campaigns (7.35)
- Give demonstrations of the making of crafts (4.25)
- Establish a quality stamp (4.1)
- Protect the craft as an intangible heritage of Egypt through UNESCO (3.7)
- Allow buyers to experience the making of craft (1.3)

As shown in Figure 23 and 24, 90% of the workshops identified that they would be willing to offer craft experiences to interested customers, as well as 'show and tell' demonstrations. These findings highlights the potential of craft workshops to reflect on current trends, as expressed by the growing 'experience economy', which prioritises living experiences over products, addressing the needs of an international community interested in hands-on experiences, memory making and well-being development (UK Crafts Council, 2020).

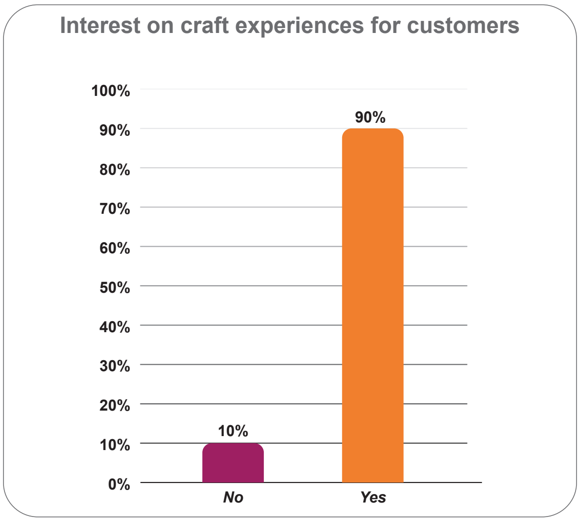


Figure 23. Workshops' willingness to offer craft experiences to interested customers.

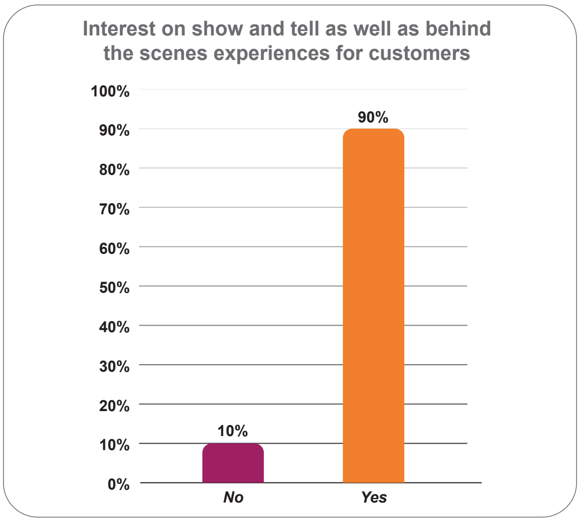


Figure 24. Workshops' willingness to offer experiences of the type 'show and tell' and 'behind the scenes' to potential customers.

4.6. Findings: Digital Transformation

As illustrated in Figure 25, workshops highlighted that they need support in various areas, such as handling and processing materials (37%) and to a lesser extent in the design (7%) and finishing of products (3%). 53% highlighted the need for other types of support including dealing with raw material prices, accessing machinery, and support with marketing.

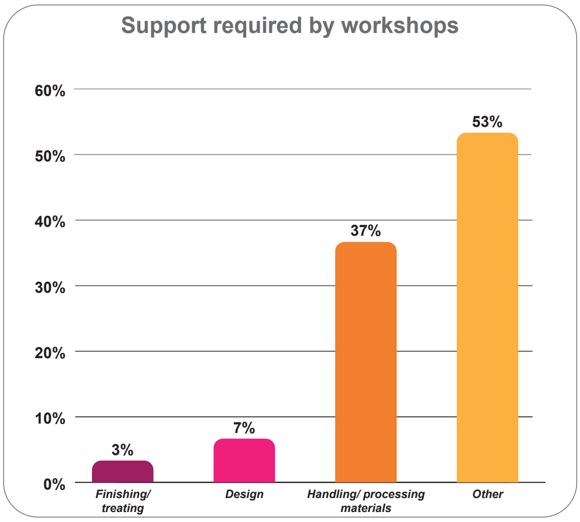


Figure 25. Areas in which the workshops need the most support to maintain their business.

In particular, 77% of the workshops identified the need to get training and support on deploying new machinery, tools and technical methods (see Figure 26). Moreover, 80% of the workshops identified the need to get support on product development, including developing concepts and ideas (see Figure 27).

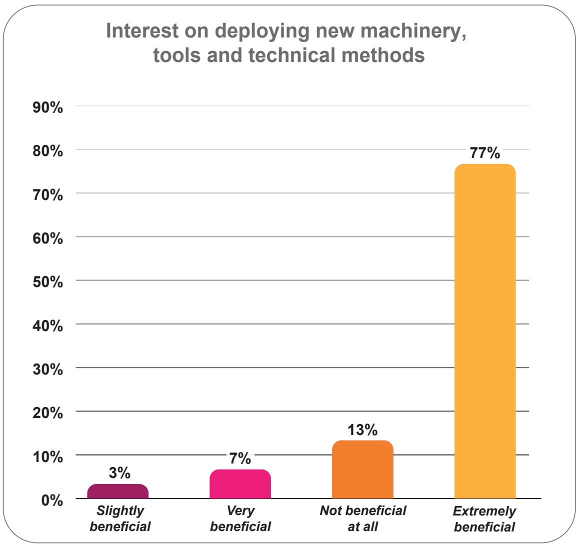


Figure 26. Workshops' opinions on the benefits of training and support for deploying new machinery, tools and technical methods for their craft.

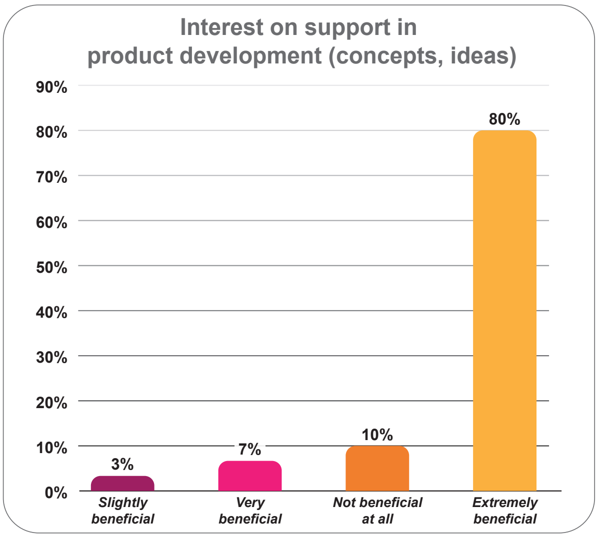


Figure 27. Workshops' opinions on the benefits of training and support for developing products, for example developing new concepts and ideas.

Workshops ranked a series of areas where they would benefit from getting training and support as shown in Figure 28. Support in reaching out to new markets was the main priority, with an ethical and eco-friendly production of craft being high on the agenda, followed by the use of digital content/social media and online platforms for selling their products.

Figure 28. Workshops' interest in getting specific training and support in specific areas.

Workshops also identified the digital tools which they use (see Figure 29). Workshops reported the use of digital photography (93%), WhatsApp (87%), and Computer Aided Manufacturing (70%). To a lesser degree, workshops use technologies to support product development, such as Computer-Aided Design (CAD) technologies (40%) or 3D printing (7%), or marketing/selling technologies/platforms, such as social media (33%), e-commerce (3%) or websites (3%). These and previous responses demonstrate the desire of the workshops to support identified gaps for introducing innovation in product development, including the development of concepts and ideas as well as the deploying of new machinery and tools which can provide a more efficient and cost-effective production process. The ability of crafters to understand market needs/tastes is another area that workshops could benefit from so that they could address directly clientele requirements and needs.

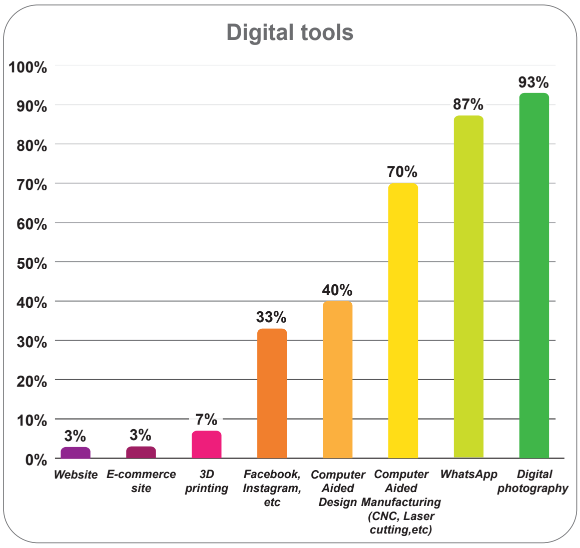


Figure 29. Digital tools which are currently used by workshops. Note that workshops might use more than one digital tool.

5. Analysis of Findings

Our survey looked at workshops in al-Darb al-Ahmar as a representative sample of the handicraft industry within Historic Cairo. The survey found that a great majority are small workshops, with 1-2 crafters, that have been in this area for decades. Their craft, mostly woodwork, serves mostly local/regional clientele and their production is less than 6-7 pieces a month including furniture, home accessories, and other products such as instruments.

The workshops in al-Darb al-Ahmar present a number of strengths, including the preservation of the intangible knowledge of traditional crafts, including woodwork as well as ornamental inlay, carving, and wood turning. These crafts reflect the traditional product and process core values of Egypt's living cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, the workshops face multiple challenges in the various areas of the product development process. Most workshops highlighted the high cost of raw materials as a critical problem. The difficulty to source high-quality raw materials or difficulties associated with raw materials' high prices affect the final product. Besides costs, their ability to understand market trends and tastes and innovate in designs, as well as to understand the market direction is limited. Hence, most workshops rely on mediators which cut into their profit.

Product quality inconsistency and low levels of quality standards affect the competitiveness of Egyptian handmade products. The lack of technology incubators and training programs affect the crafters' ability to create high-quality, competitive and innovative products. Knowledge of new techniques and tools, such as CNC machines and laser machines, is limited and most workshops recognise the need for further support in this area.

There is a scarcity of competent labour, partly because of the lack of specialized vocational training programs. But also, because of the high turnover of labour in workshops as there is little social, economic and health protection for artisans and the artisanal job is not often recognised and trusted.

Workshops report a lack of knowledge in marketing, including digital skills to underpin communication with - potential - clients. Not all artisans can afford the cost nor understand the importance of a detailed marketing study to determine the expected demand for the products, the nature of consumer tastes and preferences, as well as the competing local and imported products in terms of price, quality and quantity. Also, the inability to register and build trademarks to create awareness and trust in the products leads to a lack of recognition of the craft.

The need for expanding to new markets was also acknowledged, and the tourism/experience economy as a means to reach these markets, for instance by doing exhibitions, offering experiences and demonstrations of crafts, seem of interest yet it is still unexplored.

Moreover, workshops highlight the risk to the craft and lack of knowledge transmission, something which is very prevalent in the domain. Hence, urgent intervention and support is much needed to prevent heritage craft extinction; something that would have undesirable consequences for the communities themselves as well as the rich Egyptian intangible heritage of craft and its tangible manifestations, whether these are traditional moveable woodwork products (e.g. furniture, boxes) or architectural decorative parts of a rich urban environment (e.g. panels, ceilings, windows).

A lack of funding and investment is also prevalent amongst workshops, including the inability to provide guarantees required to finance small and micro enterprises, the high-interest rate required by the financing agencies for loans as well as the inability to cope with the losses caused by the economic downturn due to small size, small capital and production volume.

Table 1 summarises the above challenges through a value chain analysis.

Sourcing materials	- High-cost and low-quality raw materials. - Unavailability of raw materials.
Design	- Scarcity of design and digital skills. - Lack of investment in the design process. - Lack of protection on the intellectual property of the designs.
Production	- Difficulty to find skilled labour. - No awareness of quality standards. - Lack of access to new technology, equipment and digital skills.
Marketing/ Selling	- Low awareness of market demands/ tasks. - Reliability of mediators who cut into profits. - Lack of ability to expand to new markets, including export readiness. - Expertise in product pricing.
Craft as heritage	- Lack of knowledge transmission results in a high risk of losing the craft. - Underrepresentation of artisans in funding programmes.

In the past few years, various initiatives have been implemented in Egypt that involves multiple stakeholders, including governmental and non-governmental institutions (e.g. MSMEDA, IMC, Export Council and handicraft chambers), to resolve some of the challenges that artisans are experiencing. These initiatives target various areas, such as incentivising export trade through the 'She Trades Program' (https://www.itfc-idb.org/our-impact/projects/she-trades-egypt), addressing the inconsistency in product quality and development, as well as training and maintaining a skilled workforce to provide employment opportunities in the sector

Furthermore, by benchmarking with other countries that managed to grow their handicraft sector substantially, it was found that such countries achieved developments in their crafts industries by deploying complementary strategies. For example, by establishing bodies representing the sector like a ministry in India, or Council in Morocco and Tunis. Other initiatives include supporting crafters to understand the market's needs to fulfil customers' requirements and developing contemporary designs matching the consumer's tastes, as well as creating a unique brand name and creating awareness about it. This directly improves the value associated with the crafting products and artisans, while also promoting an attractive workshops profile for crafts.

Other countries also face similar issues regarding the sustainability of the value chains and tackling the informal sector. Value chains have a direct impact on the quality

of final products. Therefore, they are key for economic development and job creation in the sector. Hence, investing in developing the value chains to ensure raw materials' availability, sustainability and quality are key for most countries. Governments also face challenges regarding the informal nature of the crafts sector. In Egypt, there is a need to increase and improve formal workshops in the sector to reduce informality.

The results of this study confirm previous findings highlighting that the handicrafts sector faces numerous problems that diminish the opportunities for local traditional crafts continuity. A more organised approach is therefore required, including a national strategy for developing *place-based funding* of creative clusters with active collaboration and coordination between concerned institutions. In this sense, *place-based funding* has the potential to tackle various issues in a targeted way by operating funding schemes in defined geographic locations. This will contribute to the sustainability of crafting communities across Egypt and preserve the unique traditional intangible heritage of Egypt.

6. Conclusions

While handicrafts clusters in Egypt have a huge potential for achieving inclusive economic growth and social development, the complexity of the challenges faced by crafters and workshops require a coordinated effort among governmental and non-governmental actors and entities. This report presents evidence-based research on the current state of the al-Darb al-Ahmar cluster. Rooted for decades in Historic Cairo, these workshops preserve the knowledge of traditional ornamental crafts including wooden inlay, carving, and joinery. Their production is small and includes the development of diverse products, such as furniture, home accessories and instruments. Like other handicraft industries, these workshops face challenges related to the value chain including access to raw materials, shortage of skills, understanding of the evolving needs of customers, and lack of innovation. Considering the handicraft offering, historic character and unique location of the workshops cluster in al-Darb al-Ahmar, while also looking at the challenges that these clusters encounter in preserving and developing the knowledge and practice of craft, al-Darb al-Ahmar could be considered an ideal place to pilot developmental strategies.

Other studies have already identified interventions such as better data sectors' data and statistics management, and artisans' social protection, as well as an innovation strategy among others (Mohammed 2022). In the following paragraphs, we formulate complementarily recommendations for further development with the view that this also applies to other clusters in Egypt that present similar characteristics.

Handicraft clusters require a place-based innovation investment strategy

Handicraft clusters are deeply embedded in their geographical surroundings. Hence, a strategy for creating and maintaining localised 'culture hubs' is required. These hubs should be formed by a collective of organisations embedded in the locality, working as one to lobby, support and promote the creative and innovation potential, skills and voice of craftspeople. Through these hubs, it would be possible to organise various targeted initiatives which can be supported by public and private investment. Cultural organisations, such as those based in historical houses (e.g. Bayt Yakan and Bayt al-Razzaz in al-Darb al-Ahmar Cluster) with well-established links to local crafters are ideal partners.

The locality also provides links to sustainable tourism where the craftspeople and community can have meaningful input in initiatives to attract and provide services to tourists. In efforts towards making Historic Cairo a tourist destination, the 'culture hub' can play a key role in creating and promoting local routes, and channelling investment to develop the infrastructure which provides a meaningful 'cultural' experience to tourists which benefits the local community.

There is a need to recognise 'artisans', the value of the craft and rebuild trust

Over the last century, the appreciation of traditional craftsmanship has declined, as more capital-intensive production processes and assets became 'dominant' across the world. This has not always been the case, as craftspeople occupied an honoured role in societies of many world-renowned past civilizations. Therefore, it is imperative that any future initiatives involve the handicraft communities while building long-lasting trust-based relationships and raising awareness about the value of the craft community and its work. Social support including advice on employment, pension and health insurance will benefit craftspeople. As indicated before, place-based hubs can provide a suitable mechanism to identify win-win relationships in which the community works together to establish common goals and determine the best way to achieve this. Hubs can also provide a physical space for peer-to-peer support, developing skills, acquiring training and incubating novel ideas.

Skills development and building capacity should underpin innovation

A common theme found in artisans' responses is their need for skills development as well as for building capacity within their workshops to enable them to innovate in their practice. Currently, artisans' digital skills are very basic, mostly allowing them to operate a smartphone, and communicate with clients via instant messaging platforms. On the other hand, digital technology is now an everyday tool in the creative industries, bringing innovation to the sector as well as transforming workshop models and value chains. Nevertheless, the new possibilities for digital technologies to enhance artisans' design, production, marketing, and quality assurance processes remain largely unexplored. Similarly, crafting practice is shifting to reflect the environmental and ethical concerns of customers across the world. This is an area open for innovation that can bring benefits to artisans and customers by reducing waste and improving the end-of-life cycle of products including recycling and re-manufacturing.

A holistic strategy can prevent the disappearance of key handicraft industries

The challenges the world faces over the next few years suggest that the economic growth in Egypt is likely to remain low medium term. Along with the other threats faced by the handicraft industries, this economically volatile environment puts micro and small workshops at risk of disappearing. Hence, there is an impending need to preserve the intangible knowledge of the craft by implementing a holistic strategy, including targeted financial support to ensure its survival. Along with the recommendation to up-skill the workforce, there is also a critical need to document the intangible knowledge of the craft while enabling and promoting knowledge transfer as long as this knowledge is still alive. 'Culture hubs' can be central to this strategy, by acting as champions for traditional crafts and facilitating knowledge safeguarding, transmission, and dissemination. Meanwhile, workshops will require support and incentives to operate as part of a 'formal' economy where they can access financial support and mechanisms for scaling up, innovation support and education (e.g. stipends to study).

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Images

The digital photographs on the front cover and those used throughout the report show local crafters in Historic Cairo and London. These have been produced through projects involving the consortium who produced the report.

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