

# Indonesian Home Accessories/ Handicraft- Overview of State of Sustainability

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Upon completion of my consultancy with 10 firms ranging from small to large producers, I have discovered that sustainable practices are a precondition to making products in central Java. Through the influence of early adoptees like Out of Asia, many products are constructed of environmentally friendly materials by local villagers who either work in small workshops or directly from their homes. There seems to be an endless number of skilled villagers to weave, craft, color or assemble a diverse offering of local materials. Most, if not all, of our clients were aware of the benefits of using these materials but none truly understood its importance as a means of promoting and distinguishing its products and sustainable practices. In fact, it became instantly clear to me that grasping the concept of sustainability was going to be a simpler part of my training for my clients to understand versus how to effectively deliver this message to the American and European market. I drafted text for each company that could serve a dual purpose. First, it could be used as an environmental mission statement or what is referred to as an environmental ethics statement by the NEWH Sustainable Hospitality Committee and by the Sustainable Furniture Council. And secondly, it would serve as a sustainability profile for each firm for SENADA as required for my consultancy.

Within my two to three day training session for each firm, I discovered the Indonesian home accessories producers are all on a fairly similar trajectory with the possible exception of Prima Putra in Solo. It is my opinion that Prima Putra has the most advanced program and is successful in achieving the FSC Reclaimed wood certification, has the most immediate opportunity to reach the “green” markets of America, much of which is defined in the LEED rating system devised by U.S. Green Building Council. For all others, their key sustainable practices revolve around three main factors: Rapidly renewable fibers, general reuse and recycling, and support of their local communities. In more detail:

Rapidly renewable fibers represent the most important advantage that Indonesian home accessories have to compete in the global sustainable market. With handbags from water hyacinth, and place settings from mendong to woven bamboo baskets and amenities from pandan, central Java boasts an abundance of rapidly renewable fibers used for products. Most recognized organizations define rapidly renewable materials as those that mature within a ten-year growth cycle. In Indonesia that represents a wide range of materials, including bamboo, water hyacinth, mendong, pandan, lidi, agel, bemban, gebang, abaca, and hemp, not to mention softwoods (less than 10 years), sengon, aren wood, acacia and sonokeling. These native Indonesian materials remain a mystery to many eco-consumers around the world. Without a universally recognized certification label, Indonesian producers must educate their buyers and consumers on these local, abundant materials. As one of the most bio-diverse regions in the world, Indonesia has failed to recognize the precarious position it is in. The tropical rainforests of this nation of islands are being lost at an alarming rate and Indonesians are not receiving the true environmental value of their exported forest wood. The use of

rapidly renewable fibers can reduce the need for some hardwoods illegally harvested for furniture and building material and renew irreplaceable tropical rainforests. The Indonesian handicraft industry as a whole will also need to find fiber alternatives to cotton as fresh water becomes an even more important resource. Alternatives could come from abaca, sugar cane or hemp.

The Indonesian home accessories industry is headquartered in the most densely populated island in the world consequently the Indonesian people are some of the most resourceful in the world. The home accessories and furniture businesses have utilized a creative approach to wood waste and other discards. Much of this waste can be found in reclaimed wood accessory products made from reclaimed teak and mahogany. Frames for photos, candles, lighting, and mirrors are all offered in reclaimed or residue wood. The furniture industry has also adopted this approach with seating, tables, floor mirrors, and decorative sculptures made from reclaimed wood. Some recycled plastic and magazines have been crafted into handbags, storage bins, frame holders, and other amenity products. Most of the villages and factories that I visited had a minimal amount of waste production, reusing some for secondary accessory items. Unfortunately, many of the producers of furniture and accessories still rely on solvent-based glues, color and stain materials. I witnessed several workers without masks and gloves applying spray or brush glues and finishes in poorly or unventilated working conditions. These safety hazards are counteractive to a sustainable manufacturing approach. Additionally, the periodic incineration of waste is rendered even more harmful by petroleum-based ingredients. Suwastama, the largest of the manufacturers visited, has installed an automated drying system to allow for water-based finishes for its furniture products. Additionally, they have built a moisture control room to prevent any movement in wood or rattan joints due to changes in humidity. There is much opportunity for improvement in worker safety conditions in the home accessory and home furnishings market. The reuse of materials and the more general presentation of wood in its natural state will help alleviate some of the safety hazards that exist today. It is to be noted also that quality control measures varied greatly from supplier to supplier. I advised all our clients to create a sustainable code of conduct for safety and quality issues. The great range of suppliers working in small villages or homes makes it imperative that the manufacturers monitor quality control thoroughly. That said, Indonesia has an abundant supply of materials that could be reused and with an expanding population, these materials will always be abundant. Their creative reuse may also increase the demand for these materials hence bringing prices to a competitive level.

The final key aspect of the Indonesian home accessory producers is their genuine commitment and loyalty to their local villages. In America where the manufacturing sector is less and less connected to their local communities, people may receive no benefit from local factories. The home accessories industry in Indonesia is integrally tied into their villages. All of the companies

we visited source most of their materials locally, employ local workers, and in a few cases, even provide a community workshop to improve the welfare of the villagers. Eighty percent of the factories and suppliers we visited paid in excess of the regional minimum wage, provided medical assistance or had an insurance policy in place, and allowed for flexible working schedules. One organization, Apikri, has received fair trade certification and is the exemplary member of this group. As a result their cooperative organization has the most socially forward measures we witnessed. I discovered that a general lack of environmental education persists in the Indonesian home accessories and home furnishings industry, as few companies, Apikri not included, have provided education on the importance of sustainable practices to their employees, suppliers, and buyers. In the diagram we used for explaining the triple bottom line- people, planet and profits, we explained the need for education to maintain the balance of all three. Irrespective, the Indonesian home accessories companies are far closer to a balance than some other Asian nations and should find a willing sustainable buyer that sees added value in their products. Lastly, many of the producers readily understood the idea of designing local. Relying on local materials and designing them to recycle or naturally biodegrade using local workers is an accomplishment that is a foundation of sustainable practices. Again, the struggle was for most in how to promote these practices and attract a sustainable buyer. Our presentation reinforced to all of them that a “green” consumer will reward an eco-friendly company that is socially responsible.

In conclusion, it is my contention that the home accessories and a few home furnishings companies- Prima Putra, for certain, have an opportunity to reach other markets through a shift in vision toward sustainability. The lack of verification and certifications should not have the impact on home accessories as it will to providers of furniture made from hardwoods. The training we provided should allow most to successfully promote their sustainable businesses to home furnishings buyers and with increasing importance, the hospitality market. The sustainable profile I drafted for each organization will allow them to begin the campaign of sustainable Indonesian products to a more diversified market. Many have already begun the process of converting their logos, slogans, and websites to reflect their own specific sustainable message. The advantages of rapidly renewable fibers, recycle and reuse practices, and a deep and cultural commitment to their local communities, are the strongest aspects of sustainability for the Indonesian home accessories producers we visited. These should form the basis for a sustainable Indonesia movement. The current direction of good design and price is one that will limit the opportunities of these creative and industrious people and doom some of them. A sustainable approach will shift the balance toward a competitive future for these companies. In light of the ecological challenges facing China in the immediate future, Indonesia has a real chance to gain traction in the sustainable markets of the U.S. And lastly, it was with astonishment that I watched companies implement changes in a matter of days, a fact I will always remember with pride.

