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Practices and challenges of developing handicrafts as a core tourism product in Chencha and Konso, southern Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The handicraft sector represents small-scale industries that produce various valuable objects primarily to supply to the travel and tourism sector. Therefore, as an integral part of the informal economy, handicrafts generate income, create employment opportunities, and thereby tackle poverty. The current study investigates the practices and challenges of the handicraft business in Chencha and Konso districts of southern Ethiopia. The study adopts a qualitative research approach with an exploratory design and collects data from 60 purposively and conveniently recruited participants. We utilized a longitudinal data set that has been collected between June 2019 and February 2021. Research findings reveal that despite communities in Chencha and Konso have been practicing handicraft production for a long, still, they rely on primitive production, marketing, and distribution strategies. Research findings also highlight that handicraft stakeholders fail to adequately support and empower artisans. This research identifies pressing challenges that limit the connection between the handicraft and tourism sectors and impede the development of the handicraft sector. Eventually, the study highlights policy implications to alleviate the challenges that constrain the successful development of handicraft tourism along with its limitations and future research directions.

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Challenges and practices; handicraft stakeholders; handicraft tourism; local communities; Chencha and Konso; southern Ethiopia

1. Introduction

As one of the biggest and fastest-growing sectors in the world, the tourism sector provides substantial employment opportunities (World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) 2019; Jahangir and Pushpender 2016), and thereby contributes to the socio-economic development of communities through various ways including the production and distribution of handicrafts (Yakushiji 2014; Jabulani and Betty 2015; Yongzhong et al. 2018). The handicraft sector makes significant economic contributions to the overall tourism value chain and integrates the tourism sector with other local economic activities such as trade and agriculture (Hassan et al. 2017; Thirumaran, Dam, and Thirumaran 2014). In this regard, a study by Jonathan and Christopher (2009) in four major destinations of Ethiopia estimated that 54% of tourist spending on handicrafts directly trickles down to handicraft producers and retailers demonstrating the crucial impacts of the handicraft business in the tourism value chain in terms of both the size and its pro-pooriness. Handicraft production and distribution play a vital role in many developing countries particularly in rural areas where job opportunities are scarce (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Grobar 2019). According to Grobar

(2019), the handicraft sector employs over 10% of the labor force in many developing countries. That, in turn, substantially expedites the fight against poverty, which is the United Nations' top sustainable development goal (Hassan et al. 2017; Renu and Anupama 2018). Handicrafts also play an instrumental role in promoting local products and revitalizing local culture reinforcing the core principles of sustainable tourism development (UNWTO 2008; Suja 2014). In order to tap the opportunities that the handcraft industry offers and thereby support local economic and community development efforts, understanding the links and connections among the tourism industry, the handicraft sector, and local communities is instrumental (Jonathan and Christopher 2009; Nguyen 2015; Vadakepat 2013; Zhan et al. 2017).

Despite its crucial advantages, the handicraft sector has been constrained by several challenges such as rapid industrialization, globalization, and commodification (Pratima 2015; Yongzhong et al. 2018). Furthermore, the industry is faced with poor infrastructural development that limits the production and distribution of handicrafts, insufficient support and attention from key governmental institutions, lack of effective training, inadequate entrepreneurial skills, and poor attitude in the society towards artisans (Jung et al. 2015; Grobar 2019; Hassan et al. 2017; Yongzhong et al. 2018; Suja 2014). Thus, despite its key contributions, the handicraft sector still lags halting the capabilities of artisans to be able to evolve into medium and large-scale producers buttressed by technology as well as effective marketing tactics and distribution systems (Benson 2014; Thirumaran, Dam, and Thirumaran 2014; Vadakepat 2013).

In the context of Ethiopia a study conducted by Jonathan and Christopher in 2009 in four prime destinations of the country (i.e. Lalibela, Axum, Arbaminch, and Addis Ababa), revealed that the total economic value of handicrafts amounts to 11.1 million USD in the above-mentioned destinations, and 11.9 million USD in the whole country in 2008 suggesting the underperformance of the craft sector in Ethiopia by international standards. In Lalibela spending per international tourist on crafts, per visit is about half the level compared to Axum. This is because of the difference in variety, quality, and price level of items on sale. In another study, Mann (2006) indicated that a higher percentage of tourist revenue is distributed to beggars in contrast to craft sellers in Lalibela implying the seriousness and the extent of problems that the handicraft sector faces. In Arbaminch, spending per international tourist appeared to be very small because of inadequate souvenir shops in the city, absence of variety as craftsmen mainly focus on weaving and pottery and aim to cater mainly for domestic markets.

Dorze and Konso communities are well known in southern Ethiopia for producing different handicrafts despite their failure to significantly scale up and modernize their production, marketing, and distribution systems. Moreover, the demand for their craft products shows no consistent growth because of several reasons related to the sector including shorter length of tourist stay, the absence of mobile and electronic payment options, shortage of Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) in tourist areas, and limited variety of gift items among others (Bogale and Wondirad 2019; Mann 2006; Misganaw 2015).

Considering the critical roles of the handicraft sector in the overall tourism value chain, its labor-intensive attribute, and practical pro-poor impact particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged remote areas such as Chench and Konso (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Grobar 2019; Harris 2014; Said and Assefa 2015), it is extremely important to conduct scientific research to better understand problems and mitigate setbacks that hinder the effective development of the sector. There also has been a persistent recommendation from scholars (e.g. Hassan et al. 2017; Mutua, Massimo, and Mburu 2004; Naidu, Chand, and Southgate 2014; Tamene and Wondirad 2019; Zhan et al. 2017) for a broader, in-depth and comprehensive study pertaining to the production, marketing, distribution, and integration of the handicraft sector into the wider local economy and tourism development plan. Towards that end, the current study strives to investigate the practices, challenges, and overarching factors that impact the development, marketing, and distribution of handicraft products so that a resilient handicraft sector that makes multifaceted and meaningful contributions in tourist destinations including poverty reduction and positive image formation can

be developed. Due to the international nature of the handicraft sector, study findings also can be replicated in other destinations with similar socio-cultural and economic conditions. Specifically, this study aims to:

- (1) investigate the current practices and challenges of the handicraft business in Chench and Konso
- (2) examine the overall handicraft marketing and distribution strategies in the study areas
- (3) inspect the roles of key stakeholders in the handicraft sector in the study areas and
- (4) discuss policy directions and required interventions to boost the overall contributions of the handicraft sector in the entire tourism value chain.

In line with the above research objectives, we first conducted a critical review of relevant literature and then discussed methodological issues followed by an elaboration of research findings and discussion. Finally, we presented the conclusion and research implications along with study limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Tourism and tourist products

The tourism and hospitality sector becomes one of the biggest and rapidly growing sectors in the world. Currently, tourism is ranked 3rd in export earnings after chemicals and fuels and is ahead of the automotive and food products generating 5 billion USD a day in exports globally (UNWTO 2019). Even though its growth is stifled by the unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19 global pandemic, the tourism and hospitality sector is the only sector that has been witnessing rapid and continued growth over the previous several decades. In 2019 alone, 1.5 billion tourists crossed international borders demonstrating the startling size of the current international travel and tourism industry (UNWTO 2020). If destinations properly harness this consistently thriving sector, its implications in terms of job creation, local economic development, poverty reduction, and infrastructural and facility development are enormous (Abukhalifeh and Wondirad 2019; Reza 2009; Nguyen 2015; Zhan et al. 2017).

In its very nature, the tourism and hospitality sector is a mixture of numerous industries such as information centers, transportation companies, shopping centers, catering and accommodation establishments, and attractions (Kotler, Bowen, and Makens 2010; Wondirad and Ewnetu 2019). According to Swarbrooke (2002), tourism products fall under three main components, namely: (1) core products, which are the central component, (2) tangible products, and (3) augmented products, that involve the additional services needed to bundle the overall tourist products (see Figure 1). In a similar vein, Gunn (1988) conceptualized three zones of a spatial layout of a tourism attraction, specifically (1) the nucleus (the core attraction), (2) the inviolate belt which is an area that protects the core product from commercialized activities, and (3) zone of closure that contains the ancillary services related to the attraction (see Figure 1). Because of their nature, handicrafts are among the core and tangible tourism products that can be further augmented through innovation and creativity.

2.2. Sustainability, sustainable development and handicrafts

The concepts of sustainability and sustainable development remain to be important agendas of discussion for many years and have been applied to various sectors including tourism. As the most ubiquitous tangible tourism product (Maximiliano, Korstanje, and Mustellier 2014), the relationship between handicrafts and sustainability has been extensively discussed in literature (Sennett 2008; Jabulani and Betty 2015; Zhan et al. 2017). Scholars (e.g. Risatti 2007; Sennett 2008; Swanson and Timothy 2012) suggest that craft and craftsmanship need to be in line with the principles of

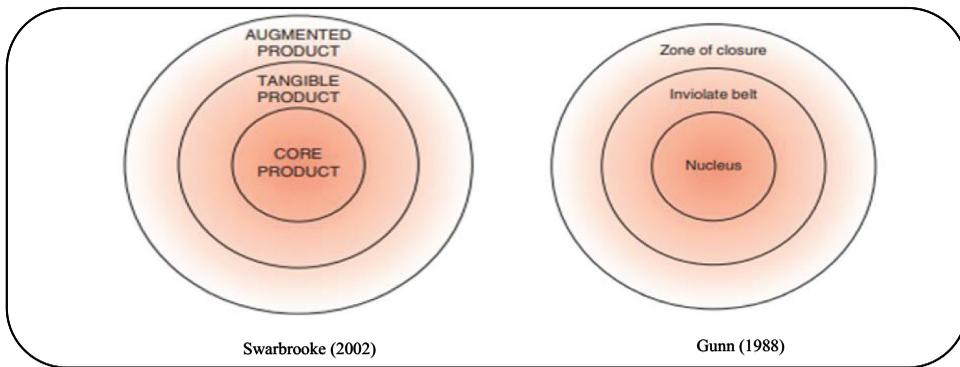


Figure 1. The three layers of tourism product.

sustainability. Thus, the production and distribution of handicrafts should underline the core sustainability principles such as fair distribution of income, authenticity, and manifestation of original cultural and local identities (Jung et al. 2015; Soukhathammavong and Park 2019; Zhan et al. 2017). In summary, the sustainability concepts embodied in the handicrafts sector can be encapsulated as follows.

- *Specialized knowledge*: this is an important ingredient of handicrafts, which refers to the production techniques (tacit knowledge) of craft items (Shiner 2012; Sennett 2008).
- *Localization*: as much as possible, handicraft products need to be made of local materials using indigenous knowledge (Adamson 2010).
- *Ethics and authenticity*: producers of handicrafts should uphold the responsibility of abstaining from manipulative behaviors but reflect ethics and authenticity in their produces (Sennett 2008; Risatti 2007).
- *Sustaining local tradition*: a handicraft is an embodiment and the reflection of societies' culture, customs, and beliefs. Per se, the skills and knowledge required for its production are traditionally handed down through generation (Lucie-Smith 1981).

Therefore, a handicraft business can only promote destinations' image properly and meets consumers' demand as well as becomes competitive if it blends the above-mentioned core sustainability dimensions.

2.3. Pro-poor impacts of the handicraft industry

Among the various industries that are related to tourism, the craft industry makes an essential contribution to pro-poor tourism growth in developing countries particularly if it is properly integrated with the tourism sector (Li and Ryan 2018; Hiroyuki 2011). Mitchell and Ashley (2009) and Tosun et al. (2007), underlined that in contrast to other segments of the tourism and hospitality sector, the handicraft industry creates larger pro-poor impacts. According to Mitchell and Ashley (2009), in Ethiopia, the handicraft industry received the highest pro-poor impact percentage (55%) followed by leisure and excursions (36%) and food and beverages (11%). Therefore, the craft industry is a more viable tool in combating poverty and unemployment in developing destinations. In other developing countries such as Peru, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Nepal, Egypt, Colombia, and Morocco, the handicraft sector also makes a profound contribution to employment creation and income generation (Grobar 2019; Nayak and Bhalla 2016; Trupp and Sunanta 2017). This is because, the craft production skills are, in many cases, possessed by the poor, and craft products constitute one of the most principal souvenirs in many less developed countries (Hiroyuki 2011). As discussed by

Hassan et al. (2017), and Trupp and Sunanta (2017), in addition to their aesthetic and cultural dimensions, handicrafts reflect several crucial socio-economic advantages among which:

- (1) The handicrafts sector is predominantly a home-based industry that requires minimum expenditure and infrastructure to establish and manage and creates jobs at a minimal cost.
- (2) It is also labor intensive and mainly uses existing skills and local raw materials, which, in turn, makes launching and running the sector easier and
- (3) In its very nature, the handicraft industry is environmentally and socio-culturally friendly.

2.4. The linkage between handicrafts and tourism

Heritage and tourism are the two sides of a coin (Jabulani and Betty 2015). Despite heritage can exist without tourism, the travel and tourism sector plays an integral role in promoting and generating income to conserve societies' heritage (Swanson and Timothy 2012; Noor et al. 2015). Handicrafts, as core elements of tourist experience, are manufactured by hand using traditional skills, symbolize the places visited, and help to recall the experiences and memories they collected (Bak 2007; Jung et al. 2015; Suja 2014). Strengthening the linkages between tourism and traditional handicrafts is crucial to assist poverty alleviation efforts in rural and urban areas (Grobar 2019; Mitchell 2012; Parnwell 2018; Scheyvens and Russell 2012; Trau 2012). Literature underlines that the craft industry has become an essential part of the overall travel and tourism sector in developing and developed countries alike (Pratima 2015). On top of evoking wonderful memories and reconnecting all the images that are gathered as experiences of a particular trip, well-designed and manufactured handicrafts help to elicit the interest of other potential tourists (Sarantou, Kugapi, and Huhmarniemi 2021; UNWTO 2008). Utilizing handicraft resources for tourism purposes plays a significant role to sustainable development and for the local residents including empowering women and youths (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Bansal and Kumar 2011; Mairna 2011; Rogerson 2010). In countries that attract a large volume of international visitors, the tourism sector offers opportunities for poor people to sell handicrafts, as tourists make significant spending on craft products (Connelly-Kirch 1982; Mitchell and Coles 2009; World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) 2019). It is in this backdrop that the current study intends to explore the practices, challenges, and benefits of successful handicraft product development to increase tourist spending and thereby boost the pro-poor effects of tourism in less economically diversified remote destinations such as Chenchu and Konso (Bak 2007; Said and Assefa 2015). Given the existence of a strongly intertwined and mutually supportive link between the tourism sector and the handicraft industry, numerous scholars and institutions including the UNWTO (2008) suggested the establishment of a sustainable interconnection, therefore, a synergy between these two important sectors can be created and augmented multifaceted benefits can be reaped.

2.5. The nature, development, and marketing of handicrafts as tourism products

The production, distribution, and sale of handicraft products are among the key pro-poor employment opportunities in the tourism value chain (Bula 2006; Suja 2014). In many developing countries, the average tourist spending on handicraft products ranges between 20 USD and 80 USD (Mitchell and Coles 2009) demonstrating the instrumental role of the handicraft sector in poverty reduction and livelihood improvement (Leesuwan 2010; Jabulani and Betty 2015).

Most handicraft producers these days tend to sell their products directly to customers which results in higher income (Fabeil, Marzuki, and Langgat 2012). When tourists purchase handicrafts directly from the producers, they can obtain accurate descriptions about the handicrafts and observe how the handicrafts are produced as an additional attraction for the tourism industry which encourages tourists to stay and spend more (Mogindol and Bagul 2014). As Hieu and Rasovska (2017) highlighted, being part and parcel of the tourism sector, the handicraft sector can be a tourist

attraction in its own right and extends tourist length of stay in addition to boosting transactions. To this end, Reza (2009) underscored that a vacation experience would become incomplete without the opportunity to go shopping. Most tourists consider shopping as a core element of their travel package and buy souvenirs and artworks to cement their visual experience with tangible objects (Li and Ryan 2018; Nayak and Bhalla 2016; Tosun 2000). According to Kotler et al. (2014), product-market scope matrix (see Figure 2), the concept of product development refers to the introduction of new products, including improvements made to the existing products, where the intent is to capture and accommodate the growing and dynamically changing consumer demand.

From the matrix displayed in Figure 2, product development and market development are considered as a middle-level risk and benefit strategy whereas market penetration comparatively carries lower risk and lower benefits. In contrast to product and market development and market penetration, product and market diversification entails both higher risk and advantages. Hence product development and market development are the most common ways of strategic marketing. However, given most handicraft business production and marketing takes place at rural level, and enterprises producing for the domestic market are generally home-based and located in rural areas, the handicraft sector faces formidable challenges that block its expansion. The forthcoming section addresses the major stumbling blocks that hinder the development of a successful handicraft sector.

2.6. Challenges hampering the handicraft sector

Various scholars (e.g. Benson 2014; Duguma 2016; Jabulani and Betty 2015; Mairna 2011; Pratima 2015; Rogerson and Sithole 2001) discussed that tourism-handicraft related activity is characterized both by a relatively small scale of production as well as with the involvement of an extensive informal sector. Because of their scale, smaller enterprises are especially vulnerable to the drawbacks of maladministration, ineffective business development plans, poor access to large markets, the seasonal nature of the tourism sector, and weak institutional setups. Given the sector is significantly dominated by small-scale informal sectors, access to financial loans and other supports such as places of production, display, and sale remain chronic challenges. Literature expounds such constraints in various developing countries halting the positive and wide-ranging impacts of the handicraft sector (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Harris 2014; Parnwell 2018). Another critical issue facing the handicraft sector is the abandonment of young generations due to emigration for better opportunities where this sector cannot offer. The consequence of such a challenge would be grave and devastating since it could lead to the entire extinction of traditional skills and wisdom in the long run. Due to numerous chronic challenges, the consumption of handicrafts decreases while industrial products become more sophisticated and dominate the market which forces local artisans to abandon their business and migrate to cities in search of other jobs (Suja 2014; Thirumaran, Dam, and Thirumaran 2014).

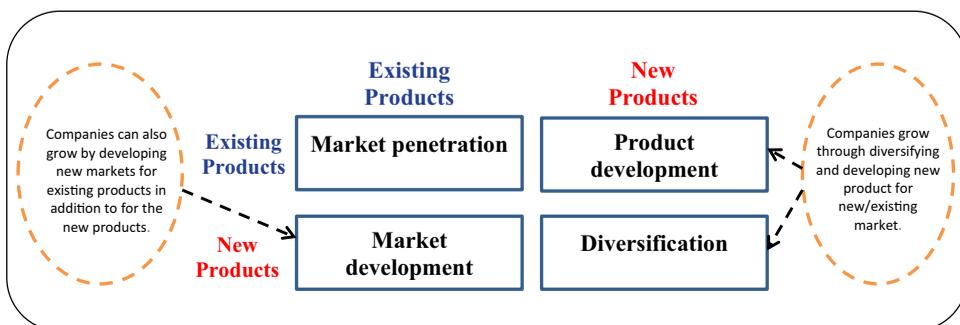


Figure 2. Product-market expansion theory (After Kotler et al. 2014).

As Thirumaran, Dam, and Thirumaran (2014) indicated, tourism development projects in the developing world pay inadequate attention to the handicraft sector. Using Vietnam as a case study Thirumaran, Dam, and Thirumaran (2014) demonstrated the struggle to create an authentic, internationally recognizable material that symbolizes the nation amid the rush to develop tourism infrastructure, solidify hospitality management, and thereby increase visitor arrivals. Several other empirical evidences also evidenced the presence of acute challenges in the handicraft sector in many developing destinations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context

This study was conducted in Chencha/Dorze/district and Konso special district (see Figure 3). Currently, several community members are involved in handicraft business both in Chencha and Konso (see Table 1) and the number of tourist arrivals has been increasing (see Table 2) until it was curtailed by the outbreak of COVID-19 global pandemic.

Located in the former Gamo Gofa Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region, 37 kilometers North of Arbaminch, Chencha district is popular for its long history of handicraft industry, especially weaving. There are a significant number of handicraft producers in Chencha and the wisdom of handicraft making has been descended through generations (Pankhurst 1990). As Figures 4 and 6 portray, Dorze communities are well known for their unique and dazzling culture of weaving from which they produce various handicrafts and gift items in addition to pottery and bamboo products (Bogale and Wondirad 2019; Wondirad, Tolkach, and King 2020).

The Konso are East Cushitic language-speaking people who dwell in small rocky and barren hills of South-western Ethiopia. Konso communities are known for their hard work and ingenuity especially in terracing, water harvesting, land use, and space panning (Wondirad 2018). They live in stone-walled and fortified villages (Watson 2009; Wondirad, Tolkach, and King 2020). Konso cultural landscape symbolizes a spectacular illustration of a living cultural tradition dating back to 21 generations of at least 500 years old (UNESCO 2010). To that end, Konso cultural landscape was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2011 particularly for demonstrating Outstanding Universal Values set by UNESCO under criterion (iii) and (v). People of Konso also produce various handicraft products that are made of wood, stone, leather, and cotton among others that attract tourist attention and create local employment opportunities (see Figures 5 and 7).

Arbaminch is the gateway to Chencha and Konso and the vast majority of tourists that visit Arbaminch also visit Chencha as well as Konso. Konso and Chencha cater to experienced Western tourists who have a high spending power despite there has been a growing trend of Asian tourists (Bogale and Wondirad 2019).

3.2 Research approach, research design, data collection, and analysis methods

This study adheres to a qualitative research approach and adopts exploratory design due to the acute shortage in the current literature related to the practices and challenges as well as marketing and distribution strategies in that handicraft sector (Creswell 2013). Since the handicraft industry involves a wide variety of actors in the overall tourism value chain (Grobar 2019; Nguyen 2015; Yongzhong et al. 2018), a qualitative research approach with exploratory design permits us to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of the handicraft industry and the various setbacks it faces from the participants' viewpoint (Creswell 2013; Drislane and Parkinson 2011; Grosseohme 2014).

We gathered primary data between June 2019 and February 2021 from purposively and conveniently selected research participants using in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews. Per

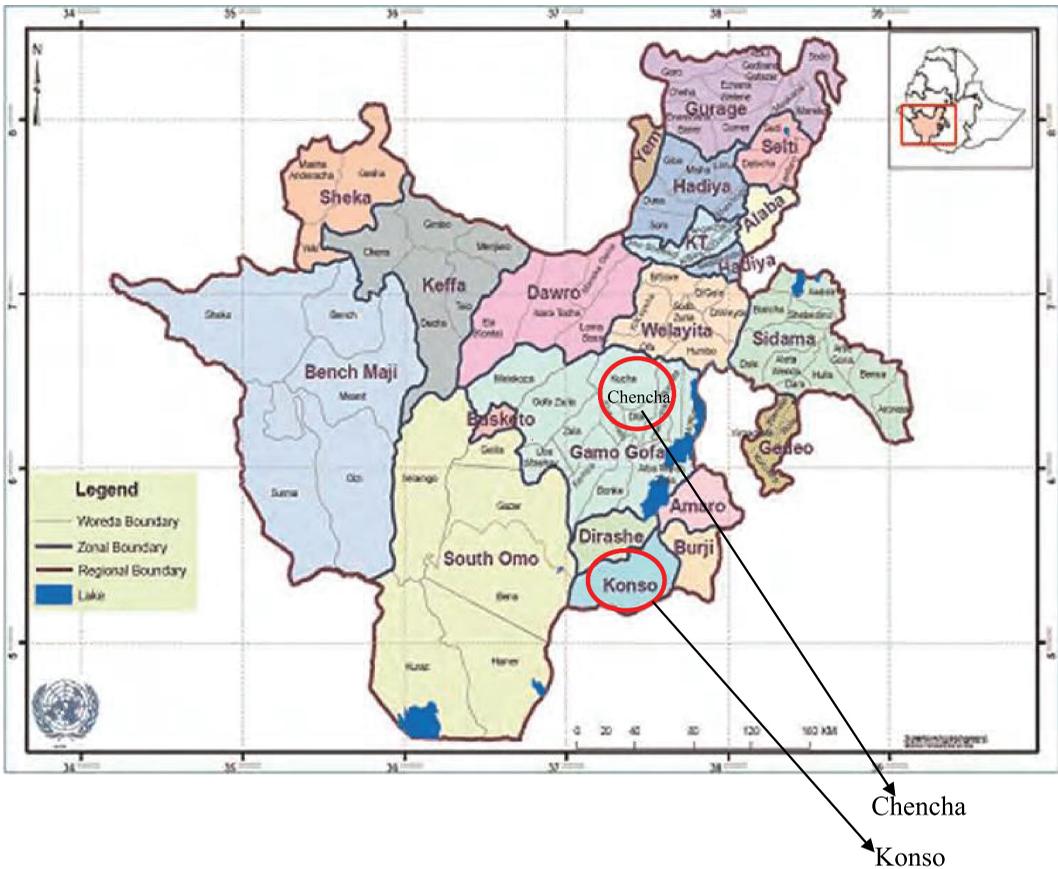


Figure 3. Map of Chencha and Konso (Watson 2009).

Table 1. Households involved in the handicraft business in Chencha and Konso (Authors' survey, 2020).

Study areas	Handicraft activity	Households involved
Chencha/Dorze	Pottery	42
	Weaving	59
	Bamboo products	62
Konso	Wood products	83
	Tanning	27
	Metal made products	18
	Weaving	58

se, this research falls under the category of a longitudinal study. Furthermore, we have conducted field observations on several occasions so that data collected through the above-mentioned techniques can be triangulated (Creswell 2013). The researchers also consulted secondary data, both published and unpublished, to validate the findings of primary data. Participants of this study are recruited from a broad range of institutions within the wider tourism and hospitality value chain in the study areas, including representatives of handicraft associations, culture and tourism offices, small and microfinance office, municipality offices, local communities, local guides, academicians, lodges, and ecolodges plus tourists visiting Chencha and Konso (see Table 3). By engaging a diverse range of actors, this study brings light and strives to develop a holistic understanding of factors that hinder the successful development of the handicraft sector and suggests possible intervention

Table 2. Tourist arrivals Arbaminch – Konso Corridor (Chencha, Konso and Jinka).

Year	Foreign tourists	Domestic tourists	Total Tourists' flow
2000	1113	1066	2179
2001	1163	1017	2180
2002	1700	1329	3029
2003	2049	2396	4445
2004	1621	1516	3419
2005	1703	1716	3419
2006	5113	2328	7441
2007	7267	8528	15,795
2008	8112	12,854	20,966
2009	8992	9607	18,599
2010	10,261	8469	18,730
2011	11,660	10,049	21,709
2012	11,227	10,540	21,767
2013	11,321	10,867	22,188
2014	11,731	13,819	25,550
2015	10,328	17,476	27,804
2016	10,211	17,213	27,424
2017	11,097	17,564	28,661
2018	11,324	17,082	28,406
2019	11,081	16,731	25,393
Total	149,074	182,167	331,241

**Figure 4.** Various clothing items in Chencha (Authors' field observation, 2019).**Figure 5.** Different clothing items and wooden statues that represent the Waka in Konso (Ethiopian Tourism Organization 2017).



Figure 6. Traditional Weaving in Chencha (Authors’ field observation, 2019).



Figure 7. Sample wood-made handicraft products in Konso (Authors’ field observation, 2020).

Table 3. Profile of research participants (Authors’ survey).

S. No	Study area	Study participants	No. of participants per category	Participant selection technique
1	Chencha	Handicraft producers	5	Purposive
		Handicraft sellers	5	Purposive
		Government employees	6	Purposive
		Local tour guides	4	Purposive
		Tourists	12	Convenient
		Lodge managers	2	Purposive
2	Konso	Handicraft producers	4	Purposive
		Handicraft sellers	4	Purposive
		Government employees	4	Purposive
		Local tour guides	4	Purposive
		Tourists	8	Convenient
		Ecolodge managers	2	Purposive
Total			60	

mechanisms. Nevertheless, due to the qualitative nature of the primary data collected and the limited number of research participants, the researchers abstain from recommending any sort of generalization based on the findings of the study.

As far as data analysis is concerned, we employed content analysis and critical analysis (Creswell 2013) in line with previous studies (e.g. Dimache, Wondirad, and Agyeiwaah 2017; Kebete and Wondirad 2019; Wondirad and Kebete 2021). QDA miner qualitative data analysis software and Microsoft Excel were used to code, organize and execute data analysis (Decrop 1999; Kreuger and Neuman 2006; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wondirad, Tolkach, and King 2019, 2020).

4. Results and discussions

As an amalgam of diverse industries such as accommodation and catering institutions, natural attractions, local culture and historical legacies including handicrafts, the tourism, and hospitality sector plays a significant role in the overall economic development both in the developed and developing countries (Jabulani and Betty 2015). In the context of developing countries, handicrafts are often manually produced using Indigenous knowledge and local materials (Sarantou, Kugapi, and Huhmarniemi 2021; Trupp and Sunanta 2017; Yakushiji 2010). In the forthcoming sections, we discussed the practices of the handicraft sector and its connections with the tourism sector. Furthermore, we examined the fundamental roles of concerned stakeholders for the development of a resilient and robust handicraft industry to support the overall socio-cultural and economic development in Chench and Konso and the challenges that affect the handicraft sector together with strategies to be implemented to successfully produce and market handicrafts and the strengthen inter-linkages with other local economic activities.

4.1. Current practices of the handicraft business in Chench and Konso

Due to the presence of a strong linkage between the handicraft business and other informal economic activities (Li, Jiang, and Nam 2020), developing countries promote the handicraft industry to lessen unemployment, improve the livelihood of disadvantaged groups within communities and foster economic development (Benson 2014; Grobar 2019; Trupp and Sunanta 2017). Both Konso and Chench communities have the experience of producing various handicrafts using traditional skills transcended through generations (Pankhurst 1990). Through successive observations we have conducted, we were able to note that currently, community members are organized through handicraft associations and participate in handicraft businesses. However, various constraints including lack of financial resources, poor marketing, and promotional effort, poor infrastructural development, lack of innovation/technology and emigration of craftsmen, lack of education and training facilities, and the challenge of industrialization and mass production limit the productiveness of the sector. In Chench/Dorze village weaving products (see Figure 4) such as Gabi, N'etela, Buluko, Dinguza, cultural cape, and products made of bamboo (such as a small chicken house, small bench, table and chairs, basket) and pottery products (such as water pot, coffee pot, plates, mud pans, and small attractive soil made objects) are the main handicraft products. On the other hand, in Konso, the most common handicraft products constitute various items made of wood (such as 'borkota', cultural bench, 'waka', handicrafts that resemble human beings, and various wood-made products of birds, animals, and other small items), metal products (such as cultural knives, forks, spoons, tongs and weapons to kill wild animals), cotton made products such as cultural dresses, and different leather made products, including cultural belts, rope, bags, and wallets, among others. In line with this, a community leader who is currently involved in handicraft production in Konso explains the current practices of the handicraft business in Konso as follows:

The practice of producing handicrafts has been descending through generations. Therefore, by producing and selling different handicraft items, Konso people supplement their household income. Particularly, for those members of the community who has limited agricultural land, the handicraft sector makes a significant contribution to support their livelihood (Community Leader in Konso, February 2021).

4.2. The nexus between the handicraft sector and tourism

In many developing nations, the handicraft sector strives to cater to the tourist market (Jung et al. 2015). This strategy does not only aim to bring fresh income to the local community but also enables to preserve and revitalize traditional values and cultural heritages (Cohen 2000; Soukhathammavong and Park 2019). Hence, attention should be given to the handicraft sector as part and parcel of the tourism sector since it promotes destinations' culture, unlocks

opportunities to locals, and help expedite poverty reduction efforts (Mairna 2011; Nguyen 2015). The economic implications of tourism-craft linkage largely depend on the effectiveness of other tourism sub-sectors such as catering and accommodation establishments, travel agents, and tour operation companies within tourist destinations (Suja 2014). In consonant with the above discussion, the owner and General Manager of a lodge in Chencha commented that:

In my opinion, there are direct and important connections between the handicraft and the tourism sectors. In fact, the primary objective of the handicraft producers is to support themselves by generating additional income. However, due to its nature, the handicraft sector can be a tourism attraction and a supplier of a tourism product. Furthermore, handicrafts can promote tourist destinations and create as well as recall memories for visitors. As a person who stays more than 20 years in the tourism sector, I can say that tourists tend to spend a considerable amount of money on handicraft products, especially if craft items reflect the required quality and usability. Therefore, if communities strive to produce standardized handicraft items that meet the requirements of visitors, the handicraft business can thrive and benefit the local community and complement their basic income (A lodge owner and General Manager in Chencha, February 2021).

Possessing strategic locations in the southern tourism corridor of the country, Chencha and Konso are among the most prominent tourist destinations (Jonathan and Christopher 2009; Pankhurst 1990; Wondirad 2018). Nevertheless, the attention given to the handicraft sector is inadequate and its integration with the tourism sector is lenient. Several constraints contribute to this. Structural problems are the most pressing ones where there is a lack of pertinent government organ that is responsible to link the handicraft and the tourism sectors. The craftsmen also do not receive customized and sustained training regarding tourism, new tourism product development, and marketing of tourism products and this hampered the diversification of the handicraft products. A lack of souvenir shops in the areas further limits the broader distribution of craft products for actual and potential consumers. One of the bottlenecks of the connection between tourism and the handicraft sector in the areas is a lack of strong associations where producers of various handicrafts come together and form a solid association that not only links the sector with tourism but also improves its development meaningfully as the following quote informs.

We do not have adequate knowledge about tourism, new tourism product development, and tourists. If training opportunities that address the above-mentioned issues are given to us, we improve our knowledge so that we can produce and sell diversified and high-quality handicrafts for our customers (Handicraft producer in Konso, July 2019).

4.3. Handicraft stakeholders' participation

Scholars such as Awangku (2014) and Jabulani and Betty (2015), pointed out the significance of cooperation among various handicraft stakeholders such as municipalities, the private sector, community and community organizations to effectively unleash local economic growth. Tourism-based handicraft businesses should consider the role of key stakeholders and create ways to involve all the necessary actors to deal with common problems in a unified manner (Mairna 2011; Benson 2014). All stakeholders (e.g. government, private sector, civil society, NGOs, and local communities) must be aware of the multiple benefits of handicrafts as core tourism products (Suja 2014; Yakushiji 2014).

The current study underscores the essential roles of stakeholders as follows:

- Culture and tourism offices should formulate pertinent policies and directives that stimulate the production, distribution, and marketing of high-quality handicrafts for tourists.
- Municipalities need to frequently communicate with craft producers, distributors, and sellers to understand their problems and provide support for the development of a competitive handicraft sector in the respective areas.

- Small and micro business coordination offices also should provide all the required support to the handicraft associations and entrepreneurs and
- National and local tour guides, as well as community leaders, shall create broad-based community awareness and understanding about the economic and socio-cultural benefits of handicrafts and promote them to visitors.

Concerning this, an expert participant from the culture and tourism offices underlines that:

Since connecting pertinent handicraft players is paramount to further develop the sector, the government is determined to push forward in this direction. We also fully understand the role of handicraft tourism in protecting and promoting culture and heritage. Nevertheless, as the handicraft sector is currently categorized under small-scale enterprises office, there is a budget limitation to successfully execute plans and this constrains the support toward handicraft associations (Tourism expert in Konso, July 2020).

The indispensable role of cohesive stakeholder cooperation for consistent growth of the handicraft sector is also underlined by an eco-lodge manager in Konso as the following excerpt demonstrates:

The potential of producing handicraft items is immense in Konso. As we all know, in the case of Konso, the craft sector is a matured economic practice and it has been supporting local communities. Nevertheless, scaling up the current practices and boosting the economic and socio-cultural benefits of the handicraft sector requires a collaborated effort from a wide range of actors starting from raw material suppliers to producers and marketers as well as distributors. Unfortunately, the producers of the handicraft sector are constrained in several critical aspects such as land issues, financial bottlenecks, and lack of technological skills requiring other relevant stakeholders to alleviate these challenges (An eco-lodge Manager, January 2021).

Municipality in collaboration with small and micro business offices provided land and organized handicraft producers into associations as tourism experts from both offices stated during our interviews. However, still, there is a lack of strong follow-up of the activities of the associations and linking their products with the tourism system. Subsequently, the handicraft business and tourism sectors are not properly linked so far. The local guides relatively play a useful role in promoting and selling handicrafts to tourists. Usually, local guides direct tourists to the areas where the associations sell their products. However, the major challenge here, as the guides imply, is that often some of the products are inconvenient for tourists as they are not handy. From the tourists' perspective, handicrafts are evaluated mainly in terms of their uniqueness, originality, and handiness (Hassan et al. 2017).

Tourists explained that the handicraft products at the two areas are of relatively good design, handmade, unique, authentic, and offered at a fair price. However, some of the tourists indicated that during their trip they could not get the opportunity to observe the production process and could not talk directly to the craftsmen as well as could not see how handicrafts are made. In this respect, Mogindol and Bagul (2014) discussed that providing the opportunity to tourists to talk with the handicraft producers and observe how the handicrafts are produced, is an additional tourism attraction and encourages tourists to stay longer in destinations spend more on handicrafts. Therefore, to overcome this challenge, key stakeholders such as travel agents and tour operation organizations in collaboration with community members can arrange a suitable visit time so that tourists can learn, experience the handicraft production cycle, and interact with the craft producers. Another issue expressed by the majority of tourists who participated in this study is the scarcity and inaccessibility of souvenir shops in the study areas and the inconvenient size of some of the handicrafts as the following quote underlines.

I have visited both Konso and Chenchä and had the opportunity to see some gift shops and have purchased some souvenirs. Overall, I am contented and especially am impressed by the authenticity of crafts produced in the areas. However, there are still rooms for improvement particularly in terms of variety, size, and introducing other transaction alternatives in addition to cash transactions. We also would like to get a chance to visit the production process to see the whole picture and appreciate indigenous wisdom (Tourist, September 2019).

4.4. Challenges of handicraft business in Chench and Konso

Considering the size of the country, rate of unemployment, and its tourism potential, the handicraft sector in Ethiopia is far below the international standard (Bosena et al. 2011). According to the International Trade Centre (2010), tourism-related handicraft sales in Ethiopia are estimated to be as high as 12.7 million USD per year. Nevertheless, 55% of the total income (6.9 million USD), directly trickles down to poor craftsmen, traders, or raw material suppliers highlighting the crucial pro-poor impact of the handicraft sector in developing countries (International Trade Centre 2010). The current setbacks of the handicraft industry that are common in the country as a whole are also reflected in Chench and Konso calling for a coordinated effort from tourism stakeholders to tackle these challenges so that the handicraft sector can thrive and complement the overall tourism and hospitality development.

Several challenges limit the successful development of handicraft tourism in Konso and Chench. The following sections encapsulate these constraints intending to first understand the obstacles and thereby provide mitigation strategies. Research findings reveal a series of impediments that affect the handicraft sector both in Chench and Konso. Challenges include lack of adequate financial resources, lack of innovation/technology and emigration of skilled craftsmanship, lack of well-designed training facilities schemes, poor marketing, and ineffective promotional efforts as well as the challenges of industrialization and mass production. In this regard, a participant from the local government underscores the need to train local handicraft producers in Chench as follows and this echoes the views of handicraft producers and distributors as well.

There has been a persistent need for comprehensive training on handicraft business among the local communities in addition to other various supports such as access to loans and venue to display and sell. We believe that successive training that comprises both theoretical and practical knowledge is vital not only to enhance the production of quality handicrafts but also to improve the overall understanding of the importance of handicraft tourism in creating job opportunities, interlinking local economic activities, and promoting cultural and natural attractions in the destination (Local government employee in Chench, March 2020).

Poor marketing of handicraft materials also has been repeatedly mentioned as one of the pressing challenges by several participants that impede the sustainable development of the handicraft sector both in Chench and Konso as the following excerpt from a local tour guide in Konso highlights.

Regarding the marketing and promotion of handicraft products, it is possible to observe that both in Chench and Konso, the utilization of information technology is inexistent. Given we are in the digital era and the multiple benefits of digital marketing, producers would have been able to successfully reach numerous consumers on various digital platforms if there was the infrastructure in place (Local tour guide in Konso, August 2019).

Since the handicraft production in developing countries is mainly carried out by deprived communities, lack of finance is also a major setback that limits the expansion and further development of the handicraft business (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Fillis 2017; Harris 2014; Parnwell 2018; Pratima 2015; Thirumaran, Dam, and Thirumaran 2014). As a result, the sector stagnates and it fails to embrace technology to increase the quantity and improve quality. This problem is also compounded by a lack of financial access from key stakeholders such as banks and credit associations (Bula 2006; Jonathan and Christopher 2009; Jabulani and Betty 2015). Such a challenge, in turn, results in the second category of constraints identified as poor innovation and technology utilization in the handicraft sector. Since it largely depends on traditional methods of production, the handicraft industry is considered to be a less technologically reliant sector and such a belief has been negatively affecting its innovativeness and productivity (Amin 2006; Pinaisup and Kumpun 2006; Senko 2003). Another persistent challenge that has been hindering the development of the handicraft industry both in Chench and Konso is found to be a lack of sustained and well-customized long-term and short-term training for community members especially for those who are unemployed and interested to pursue the handicraft business. This challenge is linked to the lack of adequate finance stated above. As a spillover effect, the absence of training and capacity development schemes, in turn, contributes to

other challenges, which are, poor networking and marketing and promotion of handicraft products to the wider market. The essential roles of networking in building the capacity of local handicraft sectors are also underlined in recent studies (Li, Jiang, and Nam 2020). Literature also evidences that lack of education and training remains to be one of the pressing challenges of handicraft tourism in many countries (Amin 2006; Mendozaramírez and Toledo 2014; Norasingh and Southammavong 2017; Redzuan and Aref 2009). Obstacles such as poor infrastructural development including power shortage, inadequate handicraft display shops, poor accessibility, ineffective internet facility, and poor networking with the tourism sector also continue to affect the handicraft sector (Sachan, Munagala, and Chakravarty 2013; Hassan et al. 2017). Moreover, grave concerns of mass factory production of sub-standard and cheaper products pose an imminent threat as members of the handicraft association both in Chench and Konso stressed. The spread of globalization and the change in lifestyle that is triggered by globalization causes a decline in the consumption of handmade traditional handicraft materials (Kolay 2016). Our study detects a rapid replacement of locally made materials such as chairs, tables, various clothing items, and utensils with imported items which cause a greater worry among the handicraft producers. A lack of sustained integration among handicraft raw material suppliers, producers, and vendors is also another challenge that affects the successful development of the handicraft sector in Konso and Chench. Additionally, inequitable distribution of income in the handicraft sector value chain is pointed out as a chronic challenge by a dozen of research participants. Furthermore, the absence of a policy framework pertaining to nurturing the handicraft business that outlines desirable supports in terms of capacity development and market networking for handicraft producers is a pressing challenge as participants frequently stressed. This affirms the findings of Hassan et al. (2017), who reported similar challenges in their study that systematically reviews literature related to handicraft and entrepreneurship. Another issue that deserves attention is a lack of inventorying and profiling of handicraft products. To carry out the collection and compilation of data related to handicrafts, relevant databases should be developed to register detailed information pertinent to handicrafts (Grobar 2019) and such databases should entail facts such as properties of manufacturing and selling center (ownership, sources of finance, types of products, techniques, and skills used in manufacturing, raw material information, distribution mechanisms of products and price tags) (Mairna 2011). In the context of Konso, in addition to the challenges discussed above, the progressively deteriorating interest from the young generation to join the handicraft sector poses another major concern (Barrère 2016).

5. Conclusion and implications

As Table 4 demonstrates, the handicraft sector is one of the critical tourism segments with profound impacts. The development of handicraft tourism plays a key role in the preservation of traditional knowledge and the socio-economic development of remote villages since it facilitates the linkage between tourism and the handicraft sector. As literature highlights, of the items purchased by tourists, souvenirs comprise a significant share of the overall shopping expenditure (Li and Ryan 2018; Nayak and Bhalla 2016). Therefore, the handicraft industry generates a multiplier effect on the economic development of local communities (Hassan et al. 2017). In doing so, the handicraft sector helps to ameliorate income disparities between the urban and rural areas. This study explores the current practices and challenges of the handicraft business in Chench and Konso districts, southern Ethiopia. Research findings posited that handicraft-based tourism does not only bring economic benefits to tourist destinations but also has numerous socio-cultural advantages by conserving cultural values of tourist destinations against rapid deterioration and globalization (Soukhathammavong and Park 2019). Despite constraints that affect its development, currently, in Konso and Checha, handicraft tourism is practiced with profound potential for future development.

Culture and tourism offices, private tourism enterprises, municipalities, micro, and small-scale coordination offices, tour guides, local communities, and the handicraft association members are found to be key stakeholders of the handicraft sector in the study areas. The study explores various

Table 4. Summary of major themes extracted from qualitative data.

Tourism and handicraft practices in Chencha/Dorze and Konso
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handicraft business creates employment, stimulates entrepreneurship, supports destinations' tourism and the economic development of a nation. • Chencha and Konso are among the top cultural tourism destinations in southern Ethiopia. • Handicraft products such as cotton, bamboo, and pottery are common in Chencha. • In Konso, the most common handicraft products are made of wood, cotton, and leather. • Tourists are happy with the quality of handicrafts but not with the size of some of the handicraft products. • Some of the tourists stated that they did not get the chance to observe the handicraft production process and could not directly talk to craftsmen.
<p>Stakeholders' involvement in the handicrafts of Chencha/Dorze and Konso</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of culture and tourism offices of the respective study areas is found to be insufficient in supporting and linking the handicraft sector with tourism. • The municipality offices offer land for the associations but fail to follow up and supervise the overall handicraft development process. • The micro and small businesses coordination offices help to set up handicraft associations but fail to link their products to the tourism sector. • Local guides in the areas play an essential role in promoting and selling handicrafts to tourists.
<p>The major challenges of handicraft business in Chencha/Dorze and Konso</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of financial resources. • Poor marketing, distribution, and promotion. • Lack of basic infrastructure. • Poor innovation and technology adaptation. • Lack of education and training facilities. • Challenges of industrialization and mass production. • Absence of adequate souvenir shops. • Low interest from the young generation to join and work in the handicraft sector.
<p>Suggestions to improve the handicraft business in Chencha/Dorze and Konso</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The handicraft sector in Chencha/Dorze and Konso is one of the promising sectors to the local economic development and employment creation. • However, it needs attention from the government to promote such an industry into a well-organized industry. • All relevant stakeholders of the handicraft businesses should cooperate to improve the efficiency of the handicraft associations. • Irrespective of the practice of handicraft businesses in Chencha/Dorze and Konso, various challenges are apparent calling for immediate interventions.

persistent challenges and constraints that the handicraft business has been facing, including inequitable distribution of income, importation of industrialized products, lack of basic infrastructure, lack of innovation and technology, emigration of craftsmen, poor education and training facilities, limited financial resources, and poor distribution and marketing strategies among others. These issues significantly deter the contributions of the handicraft industry. Research findings revealed that the handicraft industry continues to lose its originality and quality gradually requiring immediate action from pertinent key actors of the sector. As far as the importation of mass-produced industrialized products is concerned, several studies conducted in Asia, South America, and Africa (e.g. Thirumaran 2014; Grobar 2019; Rogerson 2010) also underlined that the handicraft sector faces considerable import substitution challenge, making this issue a global issue.

In this regard, the current study recommends policy implications to relevant actors so as to resolve the aforementioned challenges. In order to enhance the productivity and efficiency of the handicraft sector, the adoption and utilization of the latest technology are instrumental. In this respect, craft producers can use 3D technology to improve the design and quality of craft production. Innovation is a transformation of ideas and knowledge into new products or services which involve technology in the production, distribution, marketing, and management (Ramadani and Gerguri 2011). Providing capacity development schemes also helps to preserve, promote, improve, and transfer the traditional craft production knowledge from generation to generation.

The government also needs to design appropriate handicraft business development and management policies that encourage handicraft producers, create a market for their products, link them with the tourism sector, and supervise their profitability and continuity. A study

conducted in Peru by Grobar (2019) also underlines the vital roles of the government in stimulating, conserving, promoting, and marketing the handicraft sector and its products. Similarly, in Chench and Konso, issues related to handicraft marketing and networking should be tackled through the use of modern digital technology to enhance the marketing and distribution performance of the sector. Digital technology would enable handicraft entrepreneurs to sell their products directly to consumers through personal orders, which helps to gain a higher income proportion by removing unnecessary brokers. The other pressing challenge that needs due attention is the financial bottleneck that thwarts handicraft producers' capacity. Mitigating this challenge requires a well-thought solution if the sector has to advance and make meaningful contributions to poverty reduction and job creation in Chench and Konso. Access to credit and loans from local banks and other financial institutions should be facilitated to solve financial constraints. It is also imperative that all concerned parties of the handicraft sector work together to help those operating in the traditional handicrafts sector so that they do not abandon their profession and emigrate to other areas in search of better jobs.

The findings of the current study offer substantial theoretical and policy implications for stakeholders of cultural and heritage tourism destinations. Primarily, it highlights the practices and challenges existing in the handicraft sector and suggests policy directions to properly develop and manage as well as link the handicraft sector with the broader tourism sector. Besides, it underscores the implications of stakeholders' engagement in the production, distribution, and marketing of handicrafts. Subsequently, this research advances our understanding of the relationship between the handicraft and tourism sectors as well as stakeholders' role in mitigating the various challenges that hamper the handicraft sector in developing countries. From the practical point of view, research findings might be of interest to relevant stakeholders of the handicraft and tourism sectors in developing successful tourism destinations that duly consider the sustainable development of handicrafts as core tourism products. Moreover, the relationship between handicrafts, tourism, and mechanisms to efficiently produce, market, and distribute handicrafts are highlighted. In conclusion, as the handicraft sector is the breeding ground of local entrepreneurship and job opportunity with profound value chain effects especially in rural communities, concrete measures are required to overcome the current obstacles discussed in this study and thereby fully unleash its immense and multifarious potentials in terms of employment creation, income generation and destinations' socio-cultural and environmental promotion.

6. Limitations and future research directions

Despite the handicraft industry is widely practiced in different parts of Ethiopia, this study is carried out only in two major tourist destinations of the country that are known for their handicraft products. Hence, it has a scope limitation requiring future research to expand and cover more geographical areas and destinations in Ethiopia. Moreover, the current study focuses on the practices, challenges, and state of stakeholder involvement in the handicraft sector. As such, it does not provide a broader explanation of essential issues such as gender roles in the handicraft sector and the perceptions of the youth about learning the handicraft skills and pursuing the sector as their professional endeavor. Therefore, future researchers can adopt a mixed research approach to fill this gap. Furthermore, we acknowledge that due to the qualitative nature of the primary data and the implementation of purposive and convenient participant selection as well as the limited number of research participants, generalizing based on the findings of the study is not advised. Eventually, despite the above-mentioned acknowledgeable limitations, we strongly believe that the current study contributes important knowledge in the area of handicraft tourism and ignites future research on pertinent themes such as handicrafts and community-based tourism, socio-economic analysis in handicrafts, the role of handicrafts in pro-poor tourism, sustainable tourism, and use of technology and digital marketing in handicrafts among others.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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