

Co-creating sustainable livelihoods through the art of embroidery

Submitting University: University of Pretoria

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Overview and summary of the impact:

South Africa faces persistent unemployment and labour underutilisation, disproportionately affecting women and young people. During the first quarter of 2026, the official unemployment rate was 32.7%, representing approximately 8.1 million unemployed individuals.¹ The labour-intensive clothing and textile sector offers opportunities for entrepreneurship, local production and livelihood creation, but has faced sustained pressure from global competition and low-cost imports.²

Against this background, the Department of Consumer and Food Sciences at the University of Pretoria (UP) and Mapula Embroideries established a curriculum-based community engagement partnership in 2019 to broaden the economic opportunities associated with traditional South African embroidery. Mapula Embroideries has operated for more than three decades and supports approximately 150 women embroiderers in the Winterveld and Hammanskraal communities, north-west of Pretoria. Working predominantly from home, these women produce distinctive hand-embroidered artworks that reflect South African stories, culture, and heritage. Through a fair-trade approach, their creative work contributes to household livelihoods and their children's education while preserving traditional craft skills.³

The collaboration has enabled Mapula's embroidery to be applied to contemporary clothing products, diversifying its product applications to appeal to broader consumer markets. Under the leadership of Dr Hanri Taljaard-Swart, this collaboration was embedded within the Product Development (KLR 411) Clothing Retail Management module as a curriculum-based service-learning initiative, formally registered with the University's Community Engagement Office in 2019.^{5,8} Since its inception, the partnership has evolved from incorporating existing embroidery into garments to collaborative co-design. Participating artisans have gained additional sewing, garment-construction and technical skills, while new applications for their embroidery have been developed.⁵⁻¹¹

The partnership has reached approximately 150 women artisans and about 200 UP students, who have sustained repeated cycles of co-design, training, and product development since 2019. Its significance lies in demonstrated changes to skills, production capabilities, product possibilities, and public visibility. In 2025, garments co-created through the partnership were exhibited in the UP Museums exhibition *Bokgabo ba Masela: Art of Textiles* alongside other Mapula embroidery pieces and textiles from around the globe.⁴

Underpinning academic work:

The impact is underpinned by a research-informed, service-learning curriculum within the KLR 411 Product Development module of the B Consumer Science Clothing Retail Management programme in UP's Department of Consumer and Food Sciences. Drawing on Dr Hanri Taljaard-Swart's scholarship in sustainable clothing consumption, consumer behaviour and sustainable product development, the curriculum integrates entrepreneurship, product development, sustainability and community engagement. The academic work is situated within the Humanities and Social Sciences, with strong interdisciplinary links to sustainability, consumer studies, entrepreneurship, and design-led innovation.

Over several years, students have collaborated with Mapula Embroideries to incorporate handcrafted embroidery into contemporary, sustainable garment collections. While students initially integrated pre-produced embroidered pieces into their designs, the collaboration subsequently evolved into co-design, in which students and embroiderers jointly conceptualise customised embroidery for specific collections using materials including locally sourced cotton and recycled denim.^{5,9-11} Academic engagement extends through related Textiles (TKS421) and Experiential Training (KTP403) modules, where technical sewing guides are developed, and practical training is provided in garment construction and sewing machine maintenance. The causal pathway is therefore direct: academic expertise in product

development, textiles, production, sustainability and entrepreneurship has been applied to needs identified with the community partner, contributing to additional skills, expanded production capabilities and diversified product applications.⁵⁻¹¹

Narrative description of the impact:

Since 2019, the UP-Mapula collaboration has generated societal impact through a sustained co-design, skills development and product diversification. The primary beneficiaries are women artisans associated with Mapula Embroideries and, indirectly, the households that benefit from their income-generating activities. The impact has also extended to wider public audiences through increased visibility of Mapula's embroidery and South African textile heritage.

Expanding skills and livelihood capabilities

Mapula's traditional strength lies in hand embroidery. Through the UP partnership, participating embroiderers gained additional capabilities in sewing, garment construction and technical production. These new skills expanded the range of activities through which participants could contribute to product creation and income-generating opportunities.⁵⁻¹¹ This represents a demonstrable change rather than simply an engagement activity. The intervention progressed beyond workshops; acquired skills and academic knowledge were applied to the development of clothing and textile products. Successive collaborations evolved from incorporating pre-existing embroidery into garments to co-developing customised embroidery for specific collections, connecting artisans' specialist knowledge with contemporary product development expertise.^{5,8-11} By expanding their production skills and applications of their craft, the UP partnership strengthened the capabilities underpinning Mapula Embroideries' established livelihood model. Mapula's broader activities also support management, production and leadership development, while some artists have participated in international skills-transfer initiatives in Rwanda. The women consistently demonstrate a strong commitment to investing in the education of their children and extended families, thereby contributing to longer-term community development.³

Diversifying products through sustainable co-design

The collaboration expanded how Mapula Embroideries could be incorporated into products. Embroidery, traditionally presented as artworks, was incorporated into contemporary garments, while co-design enabled customised embroidery for specific collections.^{5,8-11} Sustainable product-development approaches included recycled denim and locally sourced cotton, bringing together traditional handcraft, contemporary design and responsible production. This positions the artisans' cultural and creative expertise not only as heritage to be preserved, but also as knowledge that contributes to contemporary product innovation and more locally rooted clothing systems.^{5,9}

Strengthening an equitable model of knowledge exchange

The partnership has developed into a sustained relationship based on complementary expertise. Mapula artisans contribute extensive embroidery knowledge, artistic practice, and cultural storytelling, while UP contributes academically grounded expertise in clothing design, product development, production, and entrepreneurship.⁶⁻¹¹ This reciprocal model strengthens the significance and sustainability of the impact. The women are positioned as co-creators and knowledge holders rather than passive recipients of university assistance. Continued collaboration since 2019 has enabled repeated cycles of skills exchange and product development rather than once-off intervention.⁵⁻¹¹

Extending reach through public engagement with textile heritage

The partnership's reach extends beyond its direct participants. In 2025, garment collections co-created with Mapula Embroideries were included in the UP Museums' *Bokgabo ba Masela: Art of Textiles* exhibition. Displayed alongside textile works from around the world, the garments extended public exposure to Mapula's embroidery and demonstrated its application within contemporary clothing design.⁴ The collaboration has also been documented through UP publications, institutional sustainability reporting, conference dissemination and independent media, including *Twyg Magazine*.⁵⁻

¹¹ This visibility has broadened awareness of Mapula's work and of a model in which traditional craft, sustainable design and academic-community collaboration reinforce one another.

Reach and significance

The reach encompasses approximately 150 Mapula artisans; households benefiting from income-generating activities; successive participants in skills development and co-design; and wider public audiences exposed to Mapula Embroideries' craft through exhibitions and media.³⁻¹¹ The significance lies in the changes already achieved: participating artisans have acquired additional sewing and production skills; embroidery has been applied to new clothing products; the collaboration has progressed to customised co-design; and Mapula Embroideries' work has gained greater public visibility.⁴⁻¹¹ These changes arose through the application of UP's academic expertise within a sustained, research-informed service-learning partnership. This initiative contributes directly to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), demonstrating how academic and community expertise can generate societal value through skills development, livelihood diversification, sustainable production and cultural preservation.⁷

References

¹ Statistics South Africa (2026). *Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 1: 2026*. Retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/>

² Invest Cape Town. (2019). *Textiles GreenCape Resilience Report Initiative. Building a resilient clothing and textile industry in Cape Town*. Retrieved from https://www.investcapetown.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Textiles_GreenCape_Resilience-Report_Interactive_20190801.pdf

Evidence and sources to corroborate the impact

³ Mapula Embroideries. (2026). *30 years of embroidery*. Retrieved from <https://www.mapulaembroideries.org/about>

⁴ Anstey, G. (2025). *UP Museums' new textile exhibition dazzles*. University of Pretoria. Retrieved from <https://www.up.ac.za/news/museums-new-textile-exhibition-dazzles>

⁵ Taljaard-Swart, H. (2022). Sewing for sustainability and success. *T&L@NAS Bulletin*. University of Pretoria, no. 8, p. 11. <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:EU:a1e0bf65-e910-426e-98c5-f82703203f63>

⁶ Taljaard-Swart, H. & Sonnenberg, N. (2024). Sewing threads of change: Empowering communities through clothing and textile projects. *Book of abstracts. Community Engagement Seminar 2024 - Transformative collaborations: Bridging academia and communities*, p. 3. <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:EU:bb894c10-dc90-4365-94c3-90959bb31b11>

⁷ Chicksen, B. Partnering with Mapula Embroideries for mutual benefit. *Sustainable Development Report 2023*, University of Pretoria, p. 46 https://issuu.com/universityofpretoria/docs/sustainable_development_report_2023_1?fr=sNmVhNTc2NzQ3NTY

⁸ Taljaard, H. (2019). *Clothing retail management students explore sustainability with Mapula Embroideries*. University of Pretoria, Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences. https://www.up.ac.za/faculty-of-natural-agricultural-sciences/news/post_2851372-clothing-retail-management-students-explore-sustainability-with-mapula-embroideries

⁹ Taljaard-Swart, H. (2025). How University of Pretoria students learn to craft a better future. *Twyg Magazine*. (Eds) Andie Reeves. <https://twyg.co.za/how-university-of-pretoria-students-learn-to-craft-a-better-future/>

¹⁰ Maseka, M. (2021) *Sewing for success: UP retail management students work with community embroidery project to make commercially viable clothing*. University of Pretoria, University Social Responsibility. https://www.up.ac.za/usr/news/post_3026827-sewing-for-success-up-retail-management-students-work-with-community-embroidery-project-to-make-commercially-viable-clothing

¹¹ Taljaard-Swart, H. (2024). *Threaded tales: Weaving bonds beyond the needle's touch and stitching communities together with creativity*. Teaching with impact: Advancing curricular community engagement for societal transformation, University of Pretoria, p. 24
<https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:EU:95a892af-5c71-4f3f-8769-deb14da777b5>

- Verbatim quotes from all parties involved in the community engagement project (i.e., module coordinators, students, Mapula Embroidery employees and trustees)



VERBATIM QUOTES
from UP-Mapula colla

Signed off on behalf of the University of Pretoria by:

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