

Excerpted from:

Towards development of the Chilean basket willow sector

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*Researchers in Chile worked with producers of basket willow (*Salix viminalis*) and its products – furniture and handicrafts – to revitalize a declining sector through improved quality and market development.*



Manufacturing processes used for basket willow furniture have been updated to promote improved quality and design; shown, a roadside furniture market in Chimbarongo

The suitability of flexible shoots or switches of *Salix viminalis* for making handicraft items was discovered in the small town of Chimbarongo, 200 km from Santiago, in the early twentieth century. People began to cultivate the species and artisans were trained to produce furniture that reached the capital and elsewhere in the country. In Chile, activities related to the cultivation and manufacture of basket willow products have remained concentrated in the Chimbarongo area.

By the end of the 1990s, 223 ha were under *S. viminalis* cultivation in Chimbarongo, divided among 88 plantations, most of them belonging to small-scale producers. About 1 200 workshops were producing a wide range of willow articles, most of which were sold on the local market. However, producers and intermediaries had begun to export a large amount of basket willow (800 tonnes of dry material per year,

valuing US\$750 000), so that the local artisans lacked the raw material needed for their products.

Moreover, other materials such as wood, leather and plastic were beginning to replace willow in the manufacture of

An article that literally “weaves knowledge into development” – relating experiences in strengthening the basket willow weaving industry for enhanced rural development.

furniture, packaging and other household articles. The quality of willow products was insufficient to compete on better markets and designs were old-fashioned. Thus the demand for the Chimbarongo artisans’ work declined. The result was a slump in craftwork in Chimbarongo,

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Cuttings are taken from one-year-old willow saplings for planting between June and August

reducing some 4 000 people connected with the sector to subsistence standards of living.

At the same time, in contrast with the situation in Chimbarongo, appreciation of natural products and craftwork has increased globally, as seen in the large trade in products made of natural fibres. For example, large volumes of products made from rattan – a similar plant fibre which can be used to produce similar items – are exported from Asia to markets in Europe, North America and even Chile, where they are much in demand among high-income consumers.

Therefore the Chilean Forest Research Institute (Instituto de Investigación Forestal de Chile, INFOR), in collaboration with universities and other national institutions with funding from the Fund for the Promotion of Scientific and Technological Development (Fondo de Fomento al Desarrollo Científico y Tecnológico, FONDEF), carried out a project from 1997 to 2003 to promote the development of the Chilean basket willow sector. The focus was on improving product quality, developing the domestic market and increasing exports of raw material and

Field of Salix viminalis aged one year



E. BEHNER

Basket willow switches are harvested in autumn and winter, when the plants have shed their leaves



M. ABRALOS

Harvested switches are traditionally stored in pools of water until they start to put out shoots in the spring; then the bark is stripped by hand with knives



D. KAUBA



Larger-scale producers use electric machines to strip the bark



Switches are dried after stripping



Sorting and bundling of switches according to length, diameter and defects

products, especially furniture. The project involved the whole sector, from production to small-scale craftwork to basket willow industry (see Figure).

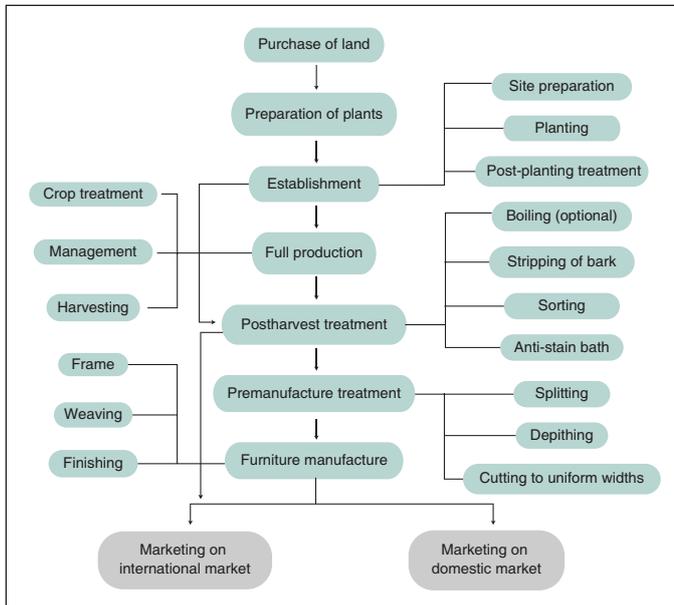
One myth

The Chimbarongo artisans shared an ingrained belief that it takes many years to train an artisan and that only men have the necessary skill and dexterity to learn the craft. This belief was preventing the involvement of women and the extension of skills to other parts of the country.

The strong hold of this myth among the Chimbarongo artisans governed their working conditions, as well as prices, delivery times, working hours and types of product, thus preventing the implementation of projects put forward by businesses that were attracted by the unique qualities of basket willow and came to settle in Chimbarongo.

Transfer of skills was needed to stimulate competition and to generate new opportunities for rural populations in other places where basket willow cultivation had proved successful. The project therefore sponsored courses in the rural areas where basket willow trials had been set up, and about 120 people from those areas were trained in basket willow manufacturing techniques. The learning period turned out to be short (two or three months); people obtained further experience on the job and were thus able to improve the quality of their output.

Most of the beneficiaries of these courses were women, who wanted to contribute to their families' income and improve their role in the community, and were thus very keen to learn. The results showed that women had considerable capacity for working in basket willow, an activity that is also viewed positively because it allows them to generate income while still caring for their home and children. In due course female artisans formed organized groups, for whom workshops on the production and marketing of their output were then held with the support of the local government.



**Stages in
basket willow
production in
Chile**



Training courses in basket willow manufacturing techniques were attended mainly by women, who had traditionally been excluded from the craft

Another myth: absent market

In the late 1990s, as a result of the stagnation of the basket willow sector in Chimbarongo, products – mainly basket-work – were being sold on the domestic market at very low prices, leading to a belief that basket willow was little appreciated in the country.

A market survey carried out by the project among medium and high socio-economic groups in the country's largest consumer centre, Santiago, revealed that of 300 households, almost half had some type of basket willow furniture. The survey also revealed that 34 percent of these households used basket willow furniture in their second homes in the country or at the sea, and that in these cases its presence rose. However, consumers were dissatisfied with quality, uninspiring designs and substandard finishing. They said that if the quality were improved, the demand would grow, since such furniture fits in well in various areas of the home and goes with many styles of décor.

At the same time, market surveys carried out in Europe and Central America revealed considerable interest in Chilean basket willow products, especially furniture. However, if the demand was to be

met, the quality needed to be improved and quantities needed to be increased to balance the high transport costs. These findings indicated the need to attract investments and to develop production in such a way as to combine artisanal work with the tools of business management.

As a result of these findings, the project initiated work to improve the manufacturing processes used for basket willow products, particularly furniture. It promoted the use of screws instead of the traditional nails, as well as the use of iron in the structure and the improvement of joints, assembly and finishing. The development of new designs was also promoted.

Courses and technical assistance were provided regarding quality control. A technological tour was organized for a group of artisans, giving them an opportunity to visit rattan furniture production centres in Asia and major showrooms and trade fairs in Europe and Central America, so that they could see for themselves the production systems adopted, the quality of the products, and current fashions and trends.

With a view to improving furniture design, the project established collaboration with the design schools of

the country's main universities, which included work with basket willow in their workshops, setting up partnerships among designers, artisans and furniture companies, and creating new applications for the material. The designs were later shown at the first basket-willow furniture fair.

This learning process for both technical experts and artisans led to the formulation of two quality standards by the Standards Institute of Chile: Standard 2039 of 1998 on "Basket willow, physical features and categories of quality for raw material", which established the classification and physical features that basket willow must comply with as raw material for the furniture industry and wickerwork; and Standard 2532 of 2000 on "Requirements and quality to be met by basket willow furniture".

CONCLUSION

Expansion of the basket willow sector offers potential economic, social and environmental benefits. Seven years' work by INFOR with artisans and rural communities has clearly upgraded an activity that was in decline and has improved knowledge of cultivation and production of basket willow. ♦