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THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY IN MEXICO 1/

by

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Mexico is a country which has a big problem of social classes and as a consequence industry depends on the economic power of its classes. The furniture industry is, of course, no exception; it has the same possibilities and limitations as most of the Mexican industries.

A weak market is found in the monied class because this sector mainly prefers the traditional hand-made furniture due to its high quality, exclusiveness and selection of good materials, for which they can afford to pay. Nevertheless, the market exists, hand-made work is more expensive and people are not as concerned with exclusiveness as before.

The lower income class also represents a weak market because of obvious economic reasons. On the other hand, we must say that the furniture industry has not really been worried about doing something for these people in spite of their furniture needs. If a serious industrial effort had been made in this field, needless to say it would represent the biggest market. The actual industrial representatives of this market are small factories that do not have the financial power to expand nor, very often, the administrative capacity to do so. Most of these manufacturers have only an empirical knowledge of how to make furniture because a serious institution which can teach them properly does not yet exist. The few schools that offer this kind of training concentrate mainly on teaching carpenters or joiners how to acquire some technical and practical knowledge. Design, ergonomics, administration, social and economic studies of the market, etc. are subjects that remain untouched, which everyone must work out according to his own experience, capacity and points of view.

All these disadvantages result in high prices of furniture, which automatically excludes the huge but poor class of our country and leaves them without the possibility of improving their standard of living, having to buy the cheapest furniture they can get and getting the poorest quality as well.

It is the increasing middle class that represents the greatest market for this country. The number of people belonging to this class is constantly growing, especially over the last 15 years. These people are becoming better educated, have bigger opportunities for jobs, get better salaries: they really represent the future of our country. Unfortunately there is still a big gap between the rich and the poor class but, as previously stated, it is the middle class that is growing the most.

The furniture industry works almost exclusively to satisfy the needs of this kind of people; on the other hand, the same problems exist on the manufacturer's side. There are no big furniture factories, with the exception of a few which are doing some serial production, but very limited. They are incredibly small when compared with, for example, any of the big firms in Finland such as Asko, Isku, Lepo, Enso, etc., especially considering the fact that Finland has a population of 4.6 million and Mexico 54 million. Our international market is also very small, the United States being our main customer.

Most of the furniture industry is based on wood. The most popular woods are pine, oak, mahogany, ayacahuite (a variety of pine) and the tropical woods that are indigenous to the southern part of the country.

Some other factories are working on plastics, fibre glass, tubular metal frames, aluminium, etc. Varnish is still used in an old-fashioned way where a lot of manual labour must be invested. Plastic lacquers, paints and varnishes are not yet very popular, but are beginning to come into use. Upholstery is at the same level as varnish; upholsterers still use very old techniques and, of course, the higher the quality, the higher the price. This seems to be the main problem to solve: the high costs of furniture. Manufacturers do not make use of mass production which is the only way to lower prices. Of course there are some factories that go into mass production but they are few and their capacity is limited.

We are in great need of help to develop such an important industry. We need the technological and financial help as well as socio-economic advice to show our manufacturers in which direction they should aim themselves so they can learn to make fewer mistakes, increase their production, lower their prices and offer the people higher quality in their products.

With regard to joinery it could be said that it is still at a workshop level. There are very few factories that make doors, kitchen cabinets, bookshelves and other industrialised units. Most of the joiners work in rather small workshops where their services are required to make hand-made joinery and carpentry. Most of the time these workers go to the place where the different work is to be carried out, such as apartment and office buildings, private houses and other buildings.

They are provided with the machinery and materials they are to use and work on the site itself. Sometimes they work at the workshop and when the work is half finished they send everything to its destination and assemble and finish the rest of the work there.

We may deduce from all this that our furniture and joinery industry is still very poor. A lot of money, effort and capacity is wasted because this industry is still considered an art and not a real industry where mass production should be the goal of manufacturers. There are many reasons for this way of thinking. Financial capacity is the main problem our manufacturers must face; they depend on loans from the private and federal banks and, at the same time, these banks depend on the national economy and the national economy depends mainly on our industrial capacity. The only way to break this vicious circle is to increase productivity. This can only be achieved when manufacturers learn to change their mentality, stop thinking of themselves as craftsmen and start thinking of the enormous possibilities that modern technology offers them. Banks very often refuse loans for the same reason: they think these people still do not know how to use modern technology and they may be right. The most important thing is not to get the money to start an industry, but to know exactly what to do with it.

This is a sector where UNIDO could participate and assist our people, helping us to learn and to teach others. I personally think that the idea of a seminar in Lahti is a very good one, but at the same time I recommend that the programme be expanded to include seminars in our own countries where more than just a token 25 people can participate. As a result we could perhaps form a Furniture and Joinery Institute which could serve as a significant resource aide to greater numbers of our fellow countrymen.

