

CASE STUDY

Ethical fashion expands in West Africa



On a Friday afternoon in December 2013, Josephine Nikiema and 30 colleagues were busily weaving fabric in Possomtenga in rural Burkina Faso. Their work, part of an order for 3,500 metres of fabric – their largest order ever – would be checked for quality and then packed for a buyer in Italy.

The order was placed by designer Stella Jean, ‘one of this season’s most talked-about names, and one of Italy’s brightest emerging fashion stars’, according to *Vogue* magazine. Like other famous designers, from Vivienne Westwood to Stella McCartney, Jean works with ITC’s Ethical Fashion Initiative to source material from poor communities in Africa, incorporating the heritage of centuries-old handloom artistry into her product line.

Following successful operations in Kenya and Uganda since 2009 and Ghana in 2012, the initiative expanded to Burkina Faso in 2013. In Burkina Faso, ITC works with 600 women to build longer-term linkages to connect the country, rich in cotton and weaving traditions, to the fashion industry.

NEW HOPE IS BORN IN COMMUNITIES

‘A new hope was born in me and in my community,’ said Nikiema, a mother of three and main breadwinner. She works for the Association of Women Weavers of Possomtenga. Like the association’s other weavers, Nikiema was thrilled to see videos of their textiles used for high-fashion products desired by women in Europe.

‘I have gained more respect and confidence. The training has strengthened my professional skills,’ said Nikiema, who learned to weave new patterns

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Josephine Nikiema, weaver, Possomtenga, Burkina Faso

on larger looms more suited to the international fashion industry’s demands.

The initiative provides work for marginalized communities. Since the initiative was launched, 7,000 people in four countries have received training and technical assistance, 90% of whom are women. A regular income allows women to build confidence, gain respect and materially transform the lives of their children, their families and their communities.

In 2012 a new market for Burkina Faso’s ethical textiles was launched. To expand and diversify its trend-conscious customer base, Japan’s United Arrows launched a new label, Tege, dedicated to responsible fashion and homeware. With the launch of its spring-summer 2014 collection, Tege United Arrows will collaborate with artisans in Burkina Faso for textiles and with Ethical Fashion communities in Kenya for retail accessories.

‘This collaboration between Ethical Fashion in Burkina Faso and Kenya for the Tege label reflects the initiative’s goals to build regional value chains to better connect micro-producers who normally work in the informal economy with the fashion industry within and beyond Africa,’ said Simone Cipriani, Chief Technical Adviser of ITC’s Ethical Fashion Initiative.



DESIGNING IN GHANA

In Ghana, the initiative works with eight emerging designers, orienting them to the demands of the international fashion industry and introducing them to markets for export-oriented employment opportunities. The Accra hub, established in 2012, was expanded in 2013 to explore potential opportunities in manufacturing and build value chains in ethical fashion.

As part of the initiative's training programme, ranging from concept design to production and marketing, the young designers in 2013 attended international fashion shows and received training from top experts in the industry such as Franca Sozzani, Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue* Italy.

'They made us understand Africa has a place in the future of fashion,' said designer Emmanuel King Arthur. 'It made me realize the impact I can have on people by sourcing the different elements of my collection in Africa.'

Ethical Fashion now works with 24 fashion industry partners, including Australia's sass & bide, Christie Brown (a 'Made in Ghana' label), Japanese department stores Isetan and Takashimaya, Switzerland's Manor, Italian luxury labels Marni and Carmina Campus, and Finnish design company Mifuko.

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE MARKET LINKAGES IN KENYA

Growth is apparent in the nearly sixfold rise in Kenyan Ethical Fashion products – 94,600 units in 2013 compared with 16,000 units in 2012. Reflecting ITC's capacity-building measures, the 1,200 full-time workers employed by Ethical Fashion Africa Ltd, the Nairobi hub, were able to increase production steeply.

A survey of 10 focus groups, including a control group, conducted as part of a March 2013 independent evaluation, revealed that 75% of beneficiaries put savings aside and increased their monthly earnings by 23.5%. Survey results show that 84% of the artisans confirmed that their families enjoyed a better diet that included fresh food and 39% were able to spend more on health care.

The initiative has also promoted financial inclusion: 53% of beneficiaries have a bank account compared to 35% in the control group. 'This is vital. World Bank analyses confirm that access to financial services is among the most important requirements for people to overcome poverty,' Cipriani said. 'Savings by the poor can mean the difference between surviving and thriving.'

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Emmanuel King Arthur, designer, Ghana

LEFT: Ghanaian designer Christie Brown in front of her store; MIDDLE: Developing capacities with sustainable materials and products forms one part of ITC's Ethical Fashion Initiative in partners