



# CASE STUDIES

Highlights of the artisans utilizing sustainable practices in Kenya's Textile and Apparel sector

FASHION  
REVOLUTION



## Kenana Knitters

Founded in 1998, in Njoro, Kenya, Kenana Knitters is a social enterprise set up to help rural women find a form of income using their spinning and knitting skills. Their ethos is to provide a source of income at a fair wage that goes directly into the hands of the women, enabling them to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families in a safe working environment. Knitting is ideal within the local community, as it requires minimal equipment and time within the context of the women's daily lives. Kenana is keen on the "farm to fashion" concept and it strives to make its products sustainable by ensuring nothing is damaging to the environment.

They provide training to its women knitters, which ranges from how to use patterns, knitting styles, use of manual knitting machines and making the crafts and other accessories. Additional to this, their social program includes Family planning clinics, HIV/AIDS testing, counselling and treatment, homeopathic health care and prevention, Women's Health Clinic, Emergency Medical Assistance, Basic IT training and computer skills, Adult Literacy classes, 'Grassroot' financial management tools, access to daily newspapers and on-site radio, electrical power outlets enabling women to re-charge phones, lights and flashlights, etc.

At the end of the year, the profits are shared on a pro rata basis. Kenana thrives to maintain the livelihoods of the women they employ by ensuring that they are paid a fair wage and on time (weekly). The focus of the organization is to look internally for solutions to fix any issues that arise and to build the organization first.

Currently, Kenana supports 573 employees, 300 knitters as well as over 200 spinners, who hand spin the wool into yarn using recycled bicycle wheels made into spinning wheels. Kenana uses high quality organic products--cotton and wool that are environmentally friendly. It produces distinct hand-crafted toys, ponchos, scarfs and other accessories. It also supports the sale of local handmade rugs and

other crafts from small businesses in the neighbouring area and the country at large. 90% of Kenana crafts are exported and 10% are sold in Kenya.

They source their organic cotton from Tanzania. It is processed by Supra Textiles and Suntan Limited. The cotton is dyed with AZO Free Dyes at Bedi Investments in Nakuru, Kenya. They source their wool locally (in Nakuru town mainly), namely from the Kenya Farmers Association and Strange Services Limited. These firms buy local wool, clean and export to countries such as China, and India. Quality wool for the local market is limited as majority of the best wool is exported. As a result, Kenana barely gets the quantity and quality it requires. When it comes to dyeing the wool, Kenana use AZO free dyes and natural plant dyes from plant leaves, vegetables and flowers grown in the area, which adds vibrant and colourful depth to designs

The challenges they face when it comes to cotton is a lack of locally sourced organic cotton. When it comes to wool, good quality wool is limited to the local market as most of it is exported. Sheep farming is limited due to the lack of diverse sheep breeds. There is a need to introduce variety of sheep breeds to improve the quality of wool production in the country.

In order to grow, Kenana are looking to purchase a carding machine, which retails at 150,000EUR, which is a huge expense for a company like theirs. Thus, they are exploring subsidies for the importation of the machine from their local county council as well as other avenues. On top of the retail value of the machine, the import duties placed on it can be very expensive making the investment unattainable without subsidies and support.



## Weavers Worth

Rose's journey started after retiring as something to keep her busy. It continued to grow and increase in scale. She chose weaving as her hobby as she was unhappy at her job and she wondered to herself 'if I want to go, where will I go?' She started knitting, as she knew some people who did it, her sister who was an airhostess at the time bought some knitting needles and brought them in for her, she now has three knitting machines. She personally did not know how to knit but she employed people who knew how to, but she was disappointed with their work. At the same time, she started knitting and she was also running a pub, which she eventually sold.

Rose's role in the Textile and Apparel industry in Kenya, is in one aspect, that of an intermediary. She buys cotton from Bedi and distributes it to the weavers in Kenya, and to a lot of them at that. She currently has 4 looms and 3 full time weavers. Working with companies such as Edun, she is a well sought-after weaver with many flocking to her to gain insight and understanding. Although weaving fabrics is her main focus, she too makes her own products which include skirts, dresses, kikoy's, hammocks, blankets and throws amongst much more.

Rose notes that there is hope of the revival of the Kenyan cotton industry, but the problem encountered is the cost. The cotton farmers have moved on and are getting income from other crops. She notes that corruption has destroyed everything, as there has been hardly any trickle-down effect in the industry. The farmers still have the equipment and the skill, but the problem lies with the government. She furthermore noted that the market has posed many problems for the Kenyan industry. A lack of one has caused many weavers to close up. It has also affected the availability of the weavers but ultimately the lack of raw supplies has also affected it greatly.

Rose highlights the need for people to work together more, for mutual education and skill sharing which will ultimately positively influence the industry. She

believes that cotton farmers need to be educated in wool as an asset, to diversify their streams of income. Many people have sheep, but they are not thinking about the wool, they see it as a burden and just give it to the shearers to take away. They do not know what value it holds. The bonds of mutual education and skill sharing reach to the spinners, weavers, farmers, designers and retailers, as a bid to integrate the industry which will in turn foster its growth.

As a supplier and weaver, Rose notes another of the challenges faced in Kenya being that weavers cannot meet their targets. There is a problem with the supply of raw materials, getting them in time. There is also a problem with getting enough weavers, as it is mostly piece work and many are part time so when its piece work weavers do not have much loyalty and they will go where they get the most money, which may not necessarily be in weaving.

The sourcing of machinery proves to be another challenge for Rose. Weaving accessories have to be imported; however, they face major importation charges, which many cannot afford. Furthermore, the directives on what type of machinery is needed to scale up the industry is also problematic. A focus on power looms, negates the power problems that are faced in the country with power supply being short for many and very expensive. Rose highlights her trip to India where she saw many textile producers still using handlooms.



## Beacon of Hope

Beacon of Hope was founded in 2002 and is based in Ongata Ronagi, Kenya. It was established as a way to respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic among women in poor communities. They started by offering skills trainings, primarily through a weaving programme, which then expanded to much more. It started as a way to give aid and support to people with HIV/AIDS. Giving the women food was not sustainable and BOH felt that economic empowerment would be more beneficial. At this point, the women had mentioned they would like to do weaving and that's how they started on the weaving training programme. This is sustainable as it is providing the women with a skill that doesn't leave them dependent on BOH but allows them to work for themselves and get income from different sources.

Initially, BOH had been offering their trainings for free, however this proved to be an unsustainable business model for them and thus they began to charge. This in turn, turned many away as, with a skill such as weaving, many did not value it and thus were unable to justify the expense. Since inception they have trained approximately 200 weavers and 3,120 people in craftwork overall, which included different kinds of weaving, card making, printing and much more.

They have 18 floor looms, as well as frame looms, which are bigger and altogether can accommodate 30 weavers, for when they have a big order. Their weavers are employed on a piecework basis, and thus get work at other places when Beacon of Hope is not that busy.

BOH work with a multitude of different fibres including wool, cotton, sisal, water hyacinth, banana, pineapple and upcycled second-hand clothing. BOH are also always keen to experiment with new fibres.

For their second-hand clothing textiles, BOH source jersey from Gikomba, a large second-hand market in Nairobi, and make it into strips, using it as the weft and cotton yarn as the warp. They mainly use this for bathroom mats, it is favoured due to its highly absorbent nature and affordable price point.

They have been unable to get any governmental support as a small business, despite attempts to set up a weaving cooperative as efforts to approach the government on an individual basis are never very successful. They highlight that there is a need for weavers and spinners to have a strong group that can lobby on a governmental level.

Consistency in the raw materials they get has been a major challenge for BOH. This is apparent with the wool itself as well as the yarn they get from spinners, due to a lack of good training. Furthermore, the availability of only hand-spun wool means that they cannot source super fine yarn and thus limits the textiles they produce. When producing super fine yarn, a spinner can make less than a kg of yarn in a day so the output would be very little thus people have mainly remained at making floor rugs, from thicker yarn. Thus, there is not a standard count when it comes to yarn leading to lots of variation.

The cotton used by BOH is sourced via Sunflag, Supra and Viva. Despite these companies being based in Kenya, the cotton itself comes from Uganda. The cotton available from Kenya is off-white and not dyed whereas the Ugandan one is dyed.

BOH notes how many are now appreciating new fibres, with many students exploring the viability of alternative fibres. However, despite its viability as an industry, there is a need for capacity building, especially on skills and equipment.



## Pendeza Weaving Project

Pendeza Weaving Project was established in the 1980's, starting off as a community hand weaving and spinning group in Nyalenda slums in Kisumu City. The founder, William Okello engaged young men and women to provide them with skills on spinning, hand weaving and dye. Mr. William Okello began by attending a technical training programme at the age of 25 on hand weaving, spinning and dyeing. As the project was formed, they began training youth in the area for free, on the skills he had adopted during his time on the technical training program.

The weaving project, which was founded with support from the British Government, has evolved to a cottage textile industry that is hand spinning and weaving fabric from organic cotton, wool, mohair, silk and water hyacinth. For the Pendeza Weaving project, their vision is to use hand weaving and spinning as a way for communities to fight poverty and improve their livelihoods.

Pendeza Weaving Project notes how the current state of ginneries in Kenya is poor, old and in a very bad state. In the past, the government arms (Agriculture and Industrialization/Trade) focused largely on growing cotton as well as ginning. Kibos Cotton Research Centre, a government facility, had ginneries that would work but they were not open to the public for use. During the good times of cotton production in the country, the government promoted farming, ginning, spinning and production of cloth but all these efforts did not boost the farmer.

They further highlight a challenge being that farmers receive very little support in the region. Local cotton production is dead and there is no market for it. Cotton used by Pendeza is sourced from Uganda. As a farmer, William did try to farm organic cotton but difficulties in the agreements with local farmers drove him to stop farming.



## Victoria Foods

Victoria Foods was founded in 2007 by James Ambani (CEO) and his wife Ira and began solely as fish resellers/brokers buying fish from fishermen in Kisumu and reselling to processors and retail customers. This then led to the company venturing into fish processing following a series of disappointments, which also saw them moving to find alternative sources and led them to Lake Turkana.

Their journey into fish leather came from being presented with copious amounts of waste following beginning to process fish. In a bid to reduce waste and to maximise profitability, they began experimenting with how to process fish skin into fish leather. After many attempts, Ira got the correct chemical mixture and was able to process good quality fish leather.

They pride themselves in being an equal opportunities employer, surpassing the two thirds gender rule. Furthermore, they work to support the satellite communities in Turkana and Kitale, the two areas they operate in.



## Hadithi Crafts

Hadithi Crafts support community-based organization (CBO) is an umbrella organisation representing a number of women's groups, which make handcrafts in south-eastern Kenya. Currently, Hadithi sells the crafts from 49 women's groups, which are made up of around 1400 women, and these numbers are still growing.

The primary handcraft in the area is weaving baskets from sisal. A tradition in Taita culture, Hadithi baskets are made by Basket Weaver Women's Groups in the rural villages between Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks. Most groups meet every two weeks to weave baskets together, and continue weaving in the meantime at home, or whilst doing other activities.

There are two types of baskets made by the women of Hadithi, namely practical weave and decorative weave. The natural dyes are sourced by the Taita women from tree barks mainly with other natural dyes coming from soil and charcoal.

Other handcrafts produced by Hadithi women's groups are traditional Maasai beadwork bracelets and accessories, upcycled yarn products from waste of the cotton T-shirts production (Wildlife Works Eco factory), Mkeka baskets from a type of indigenous palm that grows on Sagalla hill, stuffed safari animals made by Buguta Disabled Self Help Group and paper creations made from elephant dung. Hadithi plays a supportive role for these women's groups by helping them to build their capacity, improve the quality of their products, improve sales through joint marketing efforts, and learn business and other important skills to improve their lives overall. They conduct trainings for these women's groups on how to mix dyes, both natural and chemical, ensuring health and safety precautions are correctly put in place and adhered to. All of the profits from Hadithi sales, as well as any other money received from donations to Hadithi Crafts Support CBO, are used only to offer support to these women's groups.

Hadithi wants to continue the basket weaving culture in the region and as a result, they are conducting trainings with younger women in the area to weave baskets. The current generation of basket weavers are getting old and there is a need for continuity. Last year, Hadithi trained 9 new women's groups to pick up the basket weaving trade.

# Tosheka Textiles

Tosheka Textiles (LLC) are a social enterprise (USA/ KENYA). They have extensive experience in both commercial and community-based textile production. It was established by Lucy Lau Bigham and Herman Bigham. Tosheka Textiles aim to “become a trend-setter leader in the ethical production of eco-friendly fashions for the global market.”

They produce both textiles and products using natural fibres, recycled materials and eco-friendly dyes. “Inspired by the colors and textures of Kenya’s rich landscape and culture itself, our distinguished products are designed to deliver the ‘satisfaction’ our Swahili name Tosheka implies.”

Tosheka Textiles have reached 500 households thus far but only have 15 farmers currently producing with them. The reason for this drop is producing on their own as a business without much support from the government or other organisations. For these reasons, Tosheka is focusing more as a business entity, with the hope that working with interested parties can then influence others to join the industry.

Working with the eri silkworm, Tosheka has invested a lot in training the producer groups in the region and giving them the resources needed to implement what they have been trained. They have developed rearing cages that the producer groups can use without having to build a unit for them to get into business. Tosheka has not been able to bring in much equipment for production thus, they rely on traditional equipment; spinning uses the traditional spinning wheels. For degumming the silk they use pots, pans and a gas cooker. Similar to the processes that are used for dyeing.

Apart from working with the fibres produced from the eri silkworm, they also create union fabrics from recycled materials, where they combine recycled plastic with cotton or other natural fibres. The plastic they use in this process are off-cuts from the industry.

They are currently looking for large investments so they can go commercial. Investment would allow them to jump 200%. Current lead times are very slow because of the nature of production. Quantities are very low because they are working with producer groups and as a result, it has been difficult to kickstart the business, so Tosheka is looking to produce 60–70% of what they require. They have a demand, but they are not able to satisfy it. The growth rate with the farmers is moving slowly. Thus, Tosheka will be the nucleus where they can aggregate and drive the engine of the farmers by actively participating in the industry.

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