

International Trade Centre's Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI): Improving textile markets in Mali and Burkina Faso

Background to EFI:

The growing international market for handcrafted products is dominated by suppliers from Asia and South America. Textile buyers have been reluctant to source from Africa, mainly because of inconsistent quality and non-delivery risks.

The International Trade Centre's Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI) project is working to offset these perceptions in Mali and Burkina Faso. Managed through a central hub located in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, the *Groupement d'Intérêt Economique "Commerce et Artisanat pour le Bien-Etre Social"* (GIE CABES) is a social enterprise set up as a trans-national consortium of micro-enterprises in the artisanal cotton weaving value chain. The work of the people who make up these micro-enterprises – 99% of whom are women - includes dyeing the yarn, spinning, spooling, warping, weaving as well as managing the business (marketing, sales, exports, etc.) Through EFI's six-year-old network, the hand-worked natural cotton (some of it organic) is distributed to high-end fashion brands including companies such as Stella Jean (Italy), United Arrows (Japan) and Vivienne Westwood (UK).

The GIE's three workshops in Mali and seven in Burkina Faso bring together micro-enterprises including both established producers working within organised structures as well as micro-producers from the informal sector who require extensive advisory services to produce to the standards of their EFI-facilitated clients. All GIE members participate in decision-making processes.

GIE membership requires adhesion to a rigorous code of conduct that conforms to its ethical values. The code includes an agreement to implement RISE – Respect-Invest-Sustain-Empower - an ITC-led monitoring scheme that evaluates and supports sustainability, social and environmental responsibility, as well as traceability across the supply chain. GIE members commit to progressively shifting from the informal to formal sector.

Since 2013, the Ethical Fashion Initiative has been co-managing the GIE, aiming to increase production efficiency and exports with a view to attracting impact investors. To do so, EFI has been supporting the GIE and its entities with specialised technical advice and capacity support on organising production and management to comply with the demands of the fashion industry; developing new products and improving quality control; and strengthening linkages with new buyers to ensure a healthy revenue and consistent cash flow. Handwoven cotton from Burkina Faso and Mali have considerable commercial potential, but realizing it requires rigorous quality control and technological upgrading to meet market demands.

The GIE works closely with the regional government (*Gouvernement Régional du Centre*) headquartered in Ouagadougou, as well as with the European Union, as part of the EU-Africa Partnership for African Cotton, the U.S. Development for Africa Foundation), and Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation. Its overarching aims are to guarantee a reliable supply of material inputs for artisanal weaving with an eye to tapping into the international fashion value chain; to consolidate the skills and know-how acquired through the EFI project; and to ensure the financial and administrative autonomy of the GIE network on applying participatory management practices.

Challenges:

The GIE's biggest challenge in recent years has been geo-political conflict in the region. In Mali, a political crisis that started in March 2012 was succeeded by an Ebola virus outbreak and a more recent string of terrorist attacks. These events have severely affected the closely connected tourism and textile sectors. Mali's traditional weaving clusters of Segou, Mopti, Djénne-Banguiagara, Gao, and Tombouctou, in the country's central and northern regions, were among the country's most-visited tourist locations - but the hardest hit by insecurity. Many artisans have migrated south or to surrounding nations. Though compelled to manage the Malian workshops from the central hub in neighbouring Burkina Faso, EFI has been able to pursue its operations in Mali.

Tourist arrivals to Mali have dried up; many businesses have closed down, national or regional fairs have been cancelled and some land borders have been closed, shutting off pathways to regional markets. Malians now often find it difficult to obtain visas to participate in international fairs – a key

mode of connecting to potential clients – which has exacerbated local businesses' perceptions of confinement and economic standstill.

Boubacar Doumbia, the founder and master artisan of Ndomo, one of Mali's most renowned ateliers for *bogolan*, a traditional dyed and printed cotton fabric, claims that revenues have dropped by over 70% since March 2012. The manager of Tissa Sahel, a training and production centre in Mopti – an area known for repeated violent attacks – reports that fair cancellations, whether due to security concerns or Ebola fears, have hit business hard. Supplies of cotton have also become irregular.

Geopolitical problems aside, the commercial fate of artisanal textiles from West Africa depends on the international fashion value chain's willingness to value – and pay a premium for – hand-made products. Rather than being a subsistence activity dominated by individual or family-run businesses, national, regional, and international demand could combine to make artisanal weaving a dynamic and fruitful sector. This, however, will necessitate substantial investment to progressively transform the activities of informal micro-enterprises into dynamic and competitive production facilities, which in turn depends on both the willingness of weavers and the involvement of local actors such as suppliers and local institutions. These small workshops – typically run by women – almost invariably face issues in production organisation, technical know-how and design inputs that complicate integration into international markets. They also face cash flow problems – even when women are the breadwinners of the household, most – if not all – their earnings are directed towards the family; their meagre earnings are seldom invested in the business.

An additional challenge specific to Mali is the weakness of its national-level promotion of weaving – in stark contrast with Burkina Faso, which places considerable emphasis on promoting traditional textiles (*danfani*). This lack of support has further encouraged the loss of customers and workers from Malian workshops.

Role of EFI:

EFI has run workshops in Mali and Burkina Faso to support GIE members to more effectively tap into the international and local market. Together with continuous mentoring on how to serve the international market, EFI's field and international staff have supported GIE members with extensive technical assistance geared around new products, delivering consistent quality, improving financial skills, and boosting productivity. They have also helped GIE members develop a better understanding of the opportunities created by regional and national trade, as well as of the sociological and geopolitical issues that are affecting their businesses.

Results and Social Impact:

The numerous visits of international buyers introduced by EFI has highlighted the importance of introducing new fabrics, new prints, new colours and new weaves. Today, all of the workshops affiliated with the GIE look at international trends and seasons to continuously diversify their offer. By inserting the workshops in Mali and Burkina Faso into a market framework generating tangible benefits in terms of regular income and trade, EFI has gained buy-in from weavers and other parties involved in the GIE for building structured, ongoing relationships with international customers.

The improvements in design, technological innovation, and competitiveness fostered by EFI have increased sales, jobs creation, and earnings in the handmade textile sector in Mali and Burkina Faso. The result has been a positive impact on the weavers and their communities, who now have better access to basic needs (food, medical services, education, etc.). Women have been particular beneficiaries of these interventions, with greater economic empowerment translating into an important role in the decision-making process of their communities.

The Ndomo workshop in Segou (Mali) provides a particularly strong example of international production through EFI that has endured through geopolitical unrest. Following extensive marketing efforts combined with design input, an increased number of international designers have taken interest in Mali's signature *bogolan* fabric. EFI has further supported Ndomo to respond to international demand, with activities geared to restructuring the enterprise to become more effective, improving the artisanal portfolio through new designs, and building a more transparent and participative organizational culture.

Thus, despite the political instability in the economies of both Mali and Burkina Faso, the GIE was able to pursue trade activities without interruption - thus maintaining incomes for the weavers while acquiring a reputation of reliability and internal resilience with international buyers.

Keywords: micro-enterprise, women, capacity-building, Mali, Burkina Faso

Sector: Retail, consumer goods & lifestyle