

# Fashionomics lifts up Sierra Leone

**Fashionomics—the textile and fashion industry—is the second largest job engine in Africa, after agriculture. From cotton plantations and weaving mills to tailor shops, this sector provides many jobs, especially for women, who are often the driving forces behind the development of their families, villages and, ultimately, entire countries.**

A few years ago, I started investing in the tailoring business in Sierra Leone because I saw bottlenecks but also great opportunities. Below I would like to share a few highlights of recent years, the current situation, and our plans for the future with our partners.

## **Fashionomics!**

In 2015, the African Development Bank launched its *Fashionomics Initiative* to boost the textile and clothing sector in Africa. This sector provides employment, stimulates the creative economy, and fosters cultural heritage. But lack of vocational training, entrepreneurial skills, and competition from dumped second-hand clothes from Europe hamper the development of this promising sector—something I can certainly confirm from my own observation.

## **Our tailoring institute is blooming**

That's why in 2018 I set up a social enterprise in Freetown, Sierra Leone: the SEP Tailoring Institute, which specializes in tailor-made clothing and school uniforms. In our apprentice system, experienced tailors teach younger tailors the tricks of the trade. We also teach entrepreneurial skills.

Several women and a boy with a slight disability have now graduated—with a sewing machines, basic materials and the technical and commercial skills to set up shop on their own or join a workshop.



Foto 1: SEP Tailoring Institute, Rokel, Freetown

## **Trade association professionalises**

Based on our warm contacts with the United Tailors Development Association, we have been able to contribute to the professionalization of this association of tailors in the capital. Knowledge sharing, joint promotion and advocacy are its core activities. In 2020 and 2021, we arranged entrepreneurship programs around marketing, accounting and management especially for creative companies delivered by Dutch trainees in Sierra Leone. We have also provided 50 micro-credits to these well-trained and therefore low-risk participants.

## **National alliance in the making**

During my visit to Sierra Leone in September 2022, I was asked by directors of the two largest tailoring associations in the country with over 300 members to support the establishment of a national platform of tailoring shop owners—an important step to further develop the sector. A beautiful intention that opens up possibilities!

This platform will stimulate knowledge exchange and cooperation between members of both associations, provide vocational training for young people, and facilitate the sale of hand-made products abroad. A national fashion show in 2023 is already planned.

### **Export to the Netherlands**

Since I have already set up an umbrella brand for export to the Netherlands—“*Tamaraneh - made with love in Sierra Leone*”—I may be able to assist with collective exports. The hand-made laptop bags, tote bags and pencil cases from our own tailoring institute are in gradually finding their way to the market through our Dutch channels.

### **Concrete plans for the future**

The European Union and the United Nations continue to invest in Africa's textile and clothing sector with their InTex and Switch to GREEN development programs. They are keenly aware of the importance and benefits of this sector.

In the meantime, I continue to invest and develop further as a social entrepreneur and linchpin between Sierra Leone and the Netherlands. We are building a Makers Hub in Freetown (money for the roof is not yet available), where our tailoring institute will find bigger accommodation to provide even more education and internships.

Two of our other projects will also be housed there: a factory of low-maintenance water pumps made from local materials, and a warehouse for products from our sustainable plantation, which is slowly taking shape.

### **Partners make the difference**

In recent years, students from Delft University of Technology have deployed their knowledge and skills on site and have taken our projects to a higher level. The city of Tilburg and the Wilde Ganzen Foundation have also provided advice and financial support, enabling our projects to continue.

Moving forward, we see many opportunities to develop further win-win collaborations with these and other partners. Anyone with time or money, knowledge and skills, and especially solidarity with young entrepreneurs in the South, is welcome to think along and help!

It gives me great joy, each time I visit a group of young, graduated tailors in their own studio, or when I see cool, clear drinking water flowing from one of our pumps at a school! The drive and creativity of our young entrepreneurs in Sierra Leone inspire me every day!

Stay informed

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