



**Good intentions are ten-a-penny** in the textile world. Who among us doesn't want to ensure the survival of precious textile traditions? Who disagrees with the idea that craftspeople should receive fair payment for their labour? But how many of us consistently put our money, and our time, where our mouth is? Rebecca van Bergen did. In 2006 she established Nest, a clear-sighted, un sentimental, and therefore successful, non-profit organisation she describes as "a case study in social enterprise".

With a Masters in Social Work she understood the empowering potential of craft, particularly in some of the world's most deprived corners. Yet mass-produced goods are hastening the demise of artisan skills, such as Swaziland batik or Indian silk weaving. Fragmented communities without an economic backbone are the result.

Van Bergen realized "there isn't anything inherently wrong with the traditional models of capitalism and philanthropy as long as they can work more synergistically than they have in the past." Helping artisans access and understand the global markets could connect them with discerning consumers. This would ensure the future of exquisite products and their makers as well as strengthen local economies and communities.

Beginning with a form of microfinance van Bergen called microbarter, Nest provided interest-free loans to artisans in exchange for crafted products – and the organisation became a respected ethical supplier to American fashion brands. However, "we realized that we were part of the supply chain. The artisans never entered the

market... because they were always relying on us.” So in 2011 Nest changed course, with a purely philanthropic aim. Sustainability was the watchword, not dependence.

Today Nest provides business education and infrastructure to established artisan enterprises that meet strict criteria: a unique product is vital, like Varanasi’s jacquard silk or brass jewellery in Nairobi; the artisans must live in communities of acute poverty; and be women or a mixture of two normally separate groups – Hindus and Muslims in Bali or the Kikuyu and Luo tribes in Kenya.

Successful applicants undergo a needs assessment, establishing how to equip them with the skills to design, produce and export to the American market, before venturing alone. Other considerations include cost and timelines as well as the intervention’s environmental and social impact. It is a holistic approach typified by the new workspace in Varanasi, India, an area home to an ancient tradition of hand-woven silks. Created by world-renowned architect David Adjaye, the new carbon-negative weaving facility (which is solar powered and provides clean water) is not just a workshop but will provide social services and health clinics for two villages and a community space for visiting medical staff.

Once the assessment is complete, Nest begins fund-raising and finding suitable design collaborators and mentors, such as Anthropologie, Maiyet and Lotta Jansdotter. Personal and business connections are forged with fascinating creative benefits. Some traditional crafts are dying out because “tradition” has become repetition

in patterns, colours or techniques. Van Bergen explains that, “by introducing a new design direction it brings the spirit back to craft. The younger generation that’s stopping their traditional crafts suddenly have more interest because it’s creative and it’s working with the United States.”

But surely one project can only help a handful of people? These makers of quality pieces are, by definition, elites in their craft. Indeed, a Nest project can only support a limited number of people – no more than a few hundred artisans – as would be the case with many ethical suppliers of textiles and design. But there is a ripple effect of social change: more money circulates in the local economy, more children go to school and less migration takes place.

Although independence is the goal for each project Nest must seek donations in order to launch and equip each one. Interested individuals can become involved by simply giving, by hosting a Nest fundraising event, by volunteering or joining the Nest Professional Fellowship Program where self-motivated individuals with distinctive skill sets have the opportunity to work with artisan entrepreneurs either in a developing country or domestically.

Nest’s cultivation of artisans’ business nous and direct exposure to the American market are what distinguish its modus operandi. That knowledge also spreads out into the community, influencing other entrepreneurs. Ultimately, it’s a profound, ongoing effect that secures economic confidence and artistic continuity for some of the world’s poorest people.

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