



Out of Africa

A brand borne out of a desire to help women in Ethiopia earn a wage and create a better life for their families opened its first stores in Taiwan at the end of 2012, becoming the first African footwear brand to open a standalone store in Asia. The company is aiming to add between \$15 million and \$20 million in revenues by 2015 – not bad for a company that hand stitches shoes made mainly from recycled material.

The speed at which the brand has grown could point to a wider desire among consumers to connect with the background of a brand – particularly if the message is seen as worthy. SoleRebels' growth mirrors that of Toms Shoes – a US brand that has built its reputation on a philanthropic message, donating a pair to the developing world for each pair bought. But soleRebels' founder Bethlehem Alemu is keen that the shoes are bought on merit – that consumers think they are comfortable, stylish and "cool".

"Some people may know the shoes are Fair Trade or made in Ethiopia, some may not, but everyone who sees them and tries them on knows they are incredible footwear," she says. "That to me is critical as it means the product and the brand are what draw people in."

SoleRebels' shops in Kaoshiung, Taichung and Pingtung City are the first of 30 earmarked for Taiwan in the next three years. Ms Alemu sees it as a springboard into the rest of Asia, including China, where she also plans to open stores this year.

"Taiwan is an incredible market," she explains. "The people there are fashion savvy and they know good products when they see them. Their history as a footwear manufacturing centre means they are incredibly smart and discerning as customers."

Ethiopian footwear brand soleRebels' powerful message has helped it grow from a community enterprise into a multimillion dollar company, and it is setting its sights on a global invasion.



The launch of soleRebels store in Pingtung City, the third of 30 set to open in Taiwan in the next three years

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Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu, founder/CEO of soleRebels footwear.

We found that very attractive in terms of proving the strength of soleRebels from both a product and brand point of view. Additionally, Taiwan is a key retail market in Asia and one of the top 10 footwear markets in the world."

Fair trade

Established in Zenabwork on the outskirts of Addis Ababa in 2005, soleRebels is the world's first World Fair Trade Organization-certified footwear company, meaning its labour policies, wages and working environment have been deemed Fairtrade compliant. Artisans hand craft the sandals and shoes using traditional methods and materials, including local organically grown cotton and fibres from the indigenous koba plant. By viewing sewing as a key part of the quality of the end product, Ms Alemu has created some of the highest paid sewing jobs in the country. "I saw what a lot of these people could do in terms of various craft and creative skills. However, owing to extreme poverty, stigma, marginalisation and a whole load of other factors, many of them couldn't even get simple jobs."

Each of the styles is almost completely made from organic or recycled material, including car tyres, although not because it is the "in thing or because we held a focus group or because some marketing genius told us to be green," she adds. "We embrace these production methodologies because they are integral parts of Ethiopia's cultural fabric, are by their essence sustainable and low impact and, best of all, make amazing products."

"Recycling things here is a way of life; we've been recycling for years without ever calling it recycling. When you have limited resources everything is valued and valuable, everything has a purpose even if not the original purpose it was intended for."

Ms Alemu thought big from the start. As the potential market within the country was relatively small, and her ambition was to change how people viewed Ethiopia as a whole, she had to establish a product that could compete on a global stage. She also wanted people inside the country to think differently. "I saw the devastating effect that aid and charity had had on the

wider community, in terms of making people complacent and dependant. I wanted to show people that if we all worked hard we could have jobs that pay decently and we could all start to feel the pride that comes with financing ourselves and not waiting for handouts," she says.

"My story has flipped the discourse on African development from one of poverty alleviation orchestrated by external factors to one about prosperity creation driven by local Africans maximising their talents and resources."

This drive has not gone unnoticed. In 2010, a delegation from the World Bank visited soleRebels' factory and in 2011 Ms Alemu was named Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. She presented at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and joined Nelson Mandela discussing the next generation of leadership in Africa at the US's Harvard university. Forbes magazine named her among the most successful women in Africa and, in 2012, as 'one to watch' on a global scale.

Giant leaps

SoleRebels is concluding agreements for stores in the US, Germany, Australia, Kuwait, Israel and Mexico, among others, with each housing hundreds of designs. A promise to replace any shoe "no questions asked" and a guarantee that lasts as long as the sole has appealed to consumers, as has the option to customise designs online.

"We co-develop products with local partners so as to be able to reflect the tastes of their specific market, be it in style or colour or anything else. We are able to turn many new ideas into fully realised products within three to five working days," adds Ms Alemu.

Preserving traditional skills such as hand spinning and looming is important to the ethnicity of the brand but the idea was also to create employment options that would appeal to a new generation. "We want to be the company that provides the jobs that mean thousands of people – from the semi-skilled right up to the college graduate – do not have to leave Ethiopia to find well-paid, rewarding work," she explains.

And job creation is not something she is focusing on solely for Ethiopia – the company is looking to add 600 jobs outside of the country by 2015. "This is deeply exciting as soleRebels emerges as the first African brand to become an international job creation powerhouse, proof that growth in Africa equals real global economic and jobs growth across the planet. The stores we are opening in Taiwan give us a fantastic platform to showcase our products in an equally dynamic market. We feel very strongly that Taiwan is the perfect place for us to anchor our Asia-wide rollout - truly historic strides for soleRebels," she concludes. 🌀

