



New York-based model and actress  
Olivia Palermo with Maasai  
community leader William Kikanae.  
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A chance encounter between a Maasai tribal leader and the founder of a Spanish aid agency led to footwear brand Pikolinos embarking on an inspiring corporate social responsibility project.

# *Maasai Project is the pride of Pikolinos*

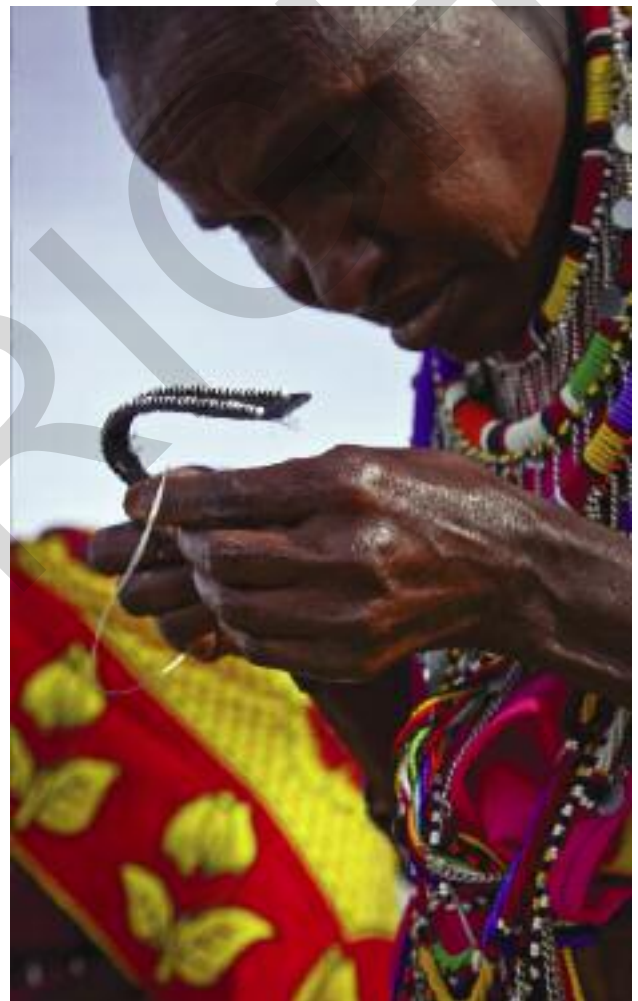
In April 2014, Elche-based footwear brand Pikolinos launched a new collection of sandals and bags with strong links to Africa. Part of an initiative called simply the Maasai Project, it involves shipping cut pieces of leather from Spain to Kenya and Tanzania and employing more than 1,000 Maasai women to decorate the material with beads, using traditional artisan skills. Pikolinos collects the decorated pieces of leather and ships them back to Spain to make up the finished products. Eight sandal styles and one bag are available in the latest collection. Pikolinos has been working with Maasai communities for five years, now, in partnership with a Spanish aid organisation called the Association for Development, Alternative Commerce and Microfinancing (ADCAM).

## *Special ambassador*

Something that may make it slightly easier for the company to manage this complicated flow of materials is that it has its own leather finishing company, Pies Cuadrados (the name means 'Square-Feet'), with the tannery located in Aspe, only 25 kilometres from the shoe factory. The launch of this latest Maasai collection took place much further away, however, at a special event in Shanghai, with actress and model Olivia Palermo presenting the project in her capacity as its special ambassador. "This project gives Maasai women an opportunity to earn a regular salary," Pikolinos has said. "But the most important thing of all is that the work allows them to maintain their culture and their lifestyle. Thanks to the money their work brings in, more than 1,000 Maasai families now have better access to education, food and medicine."

## *Chance encounter*

Shoes from the first collections from the Maasai Project appeared in 2009, but the idea goes back much further. The Maasai tribal lifestyle is one of the most threatened in the world, according to the United Nations, and William Kikanae Ole Pere, a Maasai tribal leader from southern Kenya, reached the conclusion while still a young man that his people's way of life would be easier to preserve if ways could be found for children to have better access to education and for women to earn a salary without leaving their villages. He had, for about ten years, regularly travelled north to the national capital, Nairobi, to petition businesses, institutions and even tourists to help Maasai communities, and especially Maasai women and children. When he came into contact with Pikolinos, he received the response he had been searching for.



Pieces of leather from Pikolinos's own tannery, Pies Cuadrados, are shipped to Africa from Spain for decoration at the hands of the Maasai, and then shipped back to be made into shoes.

What happened was that an encounter with ADCAM, whose founder Rosa Escandell is from Pikolinos's home province, Alicante, led to an introduction between William Kikanae and the shoe brand. He presented samples of the traditional handcraft embroidery work Maasai women can produce and Pikolinos envisaged a way of incorporating the decorative beadwork into its collections and the Maasai Project was born.

Ms Escandell is an important figure in all of this. She has worked in developing communities all over the world. She has also collaborated with Professor Muhammad Yunus of the



Pikolinos founder, Juan Perán, discusses leather decoration with Maasai women.



Work on the Pikolinos Maasai Project allows women to earn a wage without leaving their communities.

University of Chittagong in Bangladesh who, in 2006, won the Nobel Peace Prize for his development of microfinance organisation the Grameen Bank. "I've seen and lived in extreme poverty," the ADCAM founder says, "and I've seen women from various continents achieve emancipation from that poverty using their own hands, using locally sourced materials to weave or make things using artisanal methods with nothing more than a little microfinancing."

When she heard William Kikanae speak about his dreams for his community, she thought the principle could apply to his people, too, and she appealed to Pikolinos for help. "I'll never forget the first time I went to meet the women of the community," she recalls. "I talked to them about production processes, about quality control and about the differences between the summer and winter [fashion] seasons. I walked out of that first meeting and told myself that what I was trying to do was absurd but, a short time later, they had understood things very well."

"Rosa is like a bridge," says Mr Kikanae, "and we appreciate very much what she and Pikolinos have done, because this is the first project that is really helping the Maasai women."

### *Falling in love*

Juan Manuel Perán, who serves as Pikolinos's executive vice-president, describes the connection that quickly built up between the company and the Maasai as "a falling in love,

on both sides". He goes on to say: "We had a firm belief that the project we were embarking on represented an opportunity to do something huge with a community that was in need."

Pikolinos promotes its Maasai collections as fair-trade footwear precisely because it promotes the sustainable development of the Maasai community Mr Kikanae represents, not only by paying the women in the community a salary for the work they do, but also because the sale of every pair of shoes and every bag from the collection generates a donation to the project, supporting ADCAM's work. In November 2013, for example, a community library opened.

### *Always singing*

Founder and president of the group, Juan Perán, says that what the Maasai project taught him is that "with really very little, we can live and be happy". He continues: "The Maasai people are always singing, dancing, jumping into the air [a reference to a traditional dance called 'adumu'] celebrating their culture. You can see that they are happy, at peace, suffering no stress. They're such a happy people, so positive about the future and they wake up happy every day, and that's why I'm taking part in this project." He confesses to having become emotional and even to have wept at the thought of what life has given him, what he calls "the greatness of it all", and to have been able to give something back. 🌀