

Cameroon-based manufacturer OMES uses local wood to create clogs and soles for overseas brands, in an attempt to claw back some shoemaking to the African country.



The latest model features a wooden sole with interchangeable ribbons, so the shoe colour can be changed depending on the outfit.

Platform for change

It is a common misconception that clothes and shoes donated to charity are sold in one of the company's high street shops or given away for free. However, 70% of these items are sold to middlemen overseas, who then sell them on to market traders and street vendors, according to Waste & Resources Action Programme UK. While donated goods do a good job of diverting items from landfill and providing access to usually better quality and cheaper items, they do damage local industries and African countries are starting to take a stand.

Alexander Nyam, the head shoemaker at Cameroon-based Omes, was one of the thousands affected by the demise of the country's footwear industry. He learnt shoemaking skills as a young man and in the 1990s created a sandal that became popular in Central Africa and helped to lift him out of poverty. But when the local industry collapsed, so did his livelihood.

"The life of Mr Nyam is like a Hollywood movie," says Peter Gildwitz, one of the co-founder of Omes, which has its headquarters in Birmingham, UK. "Three years ago, a friend on a business trip in Cameroon found some sandals on sale. They were so gorgeous that he looked for the man who made them. He found Mr Nyam and they became friends."

Mr Gildwitz, who has a background in finance, joined Victor Semo, a marketing and product development expert, and Artur Olszak, who has worked in logistics, to launch the brand. None

of them had experience in the footwear industry but when they understood the causes of My Nyam's poverty, decided to help. "Mr Nyam knew how to make shoes, we had the experience of global markets and believed that Africa would be the next manufacturing hub," adds Mr Gildwitz.

The co-founders helped to set up a Fair Trade factory in 2016 to produce soles and designs based on wooden soles. The company now employs 12 people, including seven young men who left school at an early age with no skills.

The soles can be sold separately or as part of finished shoes. Designers can send in simple sketches or photographs of the design they would like, Mr Nyam's team assesses if they can make it, and works out a cost. All of the product is exported, mostly to the US and Europe.

"We are very lean so we're able to offer a no minimum order quantity," says Mr Semo. "For young designers who want to test the market, this is great. They appreciate this service. Recently, some established fashion brands asked us to make whole shoes for their collection."

The wood is sourced from certified timber companies in Cameroon and Gabon. The company says wooden soles help with posture and offer lower-back support and act as a thermal insulator. They cut, dry and store the wood, making sure it's at the correct temperature and is not exposed to moisture. For



Alexander Nyam brings decades of shoemaking experience to OMES. ALL CREDITS: OMES

models such as the Cecil orthopaedic, the outer soles are made of recycled tyres, collected in the streets of Cameroon and recycled in a local factory.

"Our mission is to make shoe manufacturing accessible to all," says Victor. "We believe in manufacturing 2.0, that is low volume order, customisation and manufacturing on demand to reduce our environmental impact. To succeed, proximity to the raw material is important. That is why our factory is in Central Africa where you find the best timbers in the world. Wood is healthier and more sustainable than heels made of plastic."

History

For a country of nearly 24 million, the footwear industry in Cameroon is virtually non-existent. Victor explains it began to decline when footwear group BATA, the largest local manufacturer, closed its Cameroonian factory in the early 1990s due to increasing second-hand clothing imports. Other local manufacturers followed and shortly after, the International Monetary Fund devalued the Central African franc and lifted barriers to the free movement of goods. Inflation went up and local shoemakers were unable to compete against imported second-hand goods, as well as the charities that began to distribute some free shoes to children.

"In the early 2000s, Chinese imports, with their low prices, were another blow to local shoemakers," says Victor. "Some were former employees of BATA who had set up their own businesses. We employ two of these former BATA workers."

This maelstrom has resulted in most footwear workers becoming unemployed. There is also a lack of component supplies; while the country has a large livestock population, most skins are sent over the border to tan (sometimes illegally), because of the dearth of tanneries. There are a small

number in the north of the country, but they struggle to compete because of the lack of skins, funding for modernisation and support from the government.

In 2015, for which figures are available, Cameroon exported \$2.2 million worth of shoes, with most (\$2.1 million) heading to neighbouring Gabon, the Republic of Congo and Equatorial Guinea. Around \$71,000 worth were shipped to Europe, according to the World Integrated Trade Solution. While only a small number, exports have been increasing over the past 10 years: \$390,000 worth of shoes were exported in 2005 and \$718,000 in 2010. However, these figures are dwarfed by footwear import figures: almost \$28 million worth of shoes were imported in 2015, two-thirds of these from China. But this is a drop from a peak of \$37.7 million in 2010 when \$32 million worth came in from China.

Next steps

There are multiple problems to tackle if Cameroon and some other African countries wish to bring footwear manufacturing back. However, Ethiopia and Kenya provide examples of where it is beginning to work, with Chinese shoe groups such as Huajian investing in factories there.

In March 2016, the East African Community – Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda – proposed a ban on second-hand clothes, shoes and leather to come into effect by 2019. They said that it would be the only way to revive the sectors, which could not compete with cheap imports and donated goods. Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania have raised taxes on clothes 12% and those on shoe by 15% for the 2017/18 financial year.

However, they are facing opposition from US-based recycling organisation Secondary Materials and Recycled Textiles Association, which warned of the "dramatic negative impact" on the textile recycling industry. It has gone so far as to suggest the countries should be banned from the African Growth and Opportunity Act trade deal; the office of the US Trade Representative is said to be reviewing the situation.

A multipronged approach may be required to encourage more domestic manufacture, including improving communication and power supplies, updating machinery and technology and providing tax relief for factories. This year, Italian footwear machinery company Bombelli announced its intention to kit out a new factory in the city of Bafoussam, West Cameroon, while another Italian company, consultancy Copar, will work with the Notacam tannery to help it improve its selection of raw materials and its use of chemicals.

Better transport links are also key, and Victor admits this is an area that is holding Omes back. Feedback from customers has been that the company is supplying a good-quality product but transport is expensive because of poor infrastructure.

"To manufacture in Africa is challenging but we are proving that it is possible. Our aim for the next 12 months is to reduce shipping costs and collaborate with more designers," he says. "The fact that our company is based in the UK facilitates communication with clients."

Because Omes is a Fair Trade manufacturer, each pair sold will help to reduce poverty. "In my country, one breadwinner supports 10 people, on average," concludes Mr Nyam. "It means that when you buy one pair of Omes, you feed 11 people. This is more effective than giving money to those charities that put us out of business in Africa. I am the living proof." 