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Interview with Francesca De Gottardo

(Founder of Endelea)



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Introduction

“Endelea” is the Swahili word for “keep going”. **Francesca De Gottardo** founded ENDELEA, an ethical fashion start-up, to express her adoration for Tanzania’s vibrant local culture, innovation and traditions.

In this interview with The Thinking Watermill Society, we learn more about Francesca's passion for positive impact through ethical and sustainable fashion practices that respect culture and uplift Tanzanians.



1. Can you tell us about the origin and history of Endelea? What inspired you to start this brand?

Endelea, an ethical fashion startup, was born from a vision to transform fashion into a force for good. My journey from high fashion to founding Endelea was driven by a desire to harness fashion's potential for sustainable, positive change.

After working in prestigious fashion houses, I reconnected with Tanzania, a country close to my heart since my student days. There, I was captivated by the vibrant local culture, a rich and inspiring blend of tradition and innovation. Encouraged by the insights of local intellectuals and the support of the Italian Embassy, I found the inspiration to pursue a new dream. This led to the birth of Endelea, a name that in Swahili means *“to keep going without giving up.”* This name not only represents our brand but also embodies the resilience and determination that are fundamental to our mission.

Endelea stands out by merging creativity with positive impact, rooted in a dynamic, collaborative, and growth-oriented spirit. Our approach to fashion is innovative, inclusive, and ethical.

We're not just about sales; We're about making a difference with every stitch and decision.

Our commitment is to empower lives and move forward boldly, with a clear purpose.



2. Endelea is known for its ethical and sustainable operations. Can you describe how you ensure that your brand operates in an ethical and sustainable manner?

Guided by our core principles, we've consistently focused on ethical and sustainable practices, and this dedication has earned us the **B Corp certification**. This certification is a proud marker of our commitment to high social and environmental standards, transparency, and accountability.

Additionally, at Endelea, we're aligned with important United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, like quality education, gender equality, economic growth, reducing inequalities, and responsible consumption. We really care about our employees' well-being, respecting the environment, and keeping our production practices transparent, inclusive, and ethical.

Part of our commitment is investing 3% of our annual gross revenue in social impact projects, including training and scholarships, and fostering collaborations between Italian and Tanzanian universities. Our commitment to sustainability is also reflected in our operating model, which includes designing in Milan and producing in Dar es Salaam, using locally sourced fabrics and plastic-free packaging.



3. How does Endelea ensure circularity and ethical production in its supply chain?

Endelea works with sustainable and ethical suppliers to ensure a positive impact on society and the environment.

We actively champion transparency and ethical production in our supply chain, a commitment reflected in our deliberate choice of certified suppliers. We prefer suppliers who have certifications that demonstrate clear standards and reliability, such as ISO 14021:2016 for environmental labels and declarations, FSC certification for paper products, SA 8000: 2008 for social responsibility, OEKO-TEX for material quality, Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), Organic Content Standard (OCS), Fairtrade Certification, and B Corp certification. Endelea also favours suppliers owned by individuals from minority groups.

We've always been ahead of the curve in ensuring a transparent supply chain, which led us to partner with Renoon, a platform known for its expertise in sustainability impact measurement and communication. In our last collection, we implemented QR codes powered by Renoon that track each of our products from raw materials to the end consumer. Through the traceability provided by these QR codes, we maintain a close watch over our supply chain, ensuring our dedication to ethical production. This approach helps us foster solid relationships with our partners and allows us to transparently communicate these commitments to our customers, strengthening their trust in our brand. It's a clear demonstration of our proactive approach to maintaining ethical practices and offering transparent communication with our customers.

4. Endelea is committed to respecting the culture of the origin of the materials and producing communities. Can you tell us more about how you achieve this?

We use Maasai fabrics, certified for social and environmental standards, and collaborate with the Maasai Intellectual Property Initiative, reinvesting 2% of revenues from this collection back into the Maasai community. Our Kikoi fabrics are sourced from traditional workshops, supporting artisans and preserving craftsmanship. We partner with Hadithi for sisal materials, aiding economic opportunities for women in Kenyan villages.

Our collaboration with the Tingatinga Arts Cooperative Society promotes traditional Tanzanian art and digital skills for artists. Finally, our partnership with SOKO Kenya, an ethical clothing manufacturer, aligns with our values of equality, quality of life, and sustainability, ensuring fair compensation and environmental consciousness.



5. What challenges have you faced in implementing sustainable and ethical practices in your brand, and how have you overcome them?

In implementing sustainable and ethical practices at Endelea, we've faced challenges like cultural differences and complex supply chain management. We've overcome these by forming partnerships with local communities and creating a Cultural Committee in East Africa, ensuring cultural sensitivity and respect. Balancing economic and socio-environmental goals is addressed by committing 3% of our revenues to ethical missions, reinforced by our B-Corp certification. To manage our complex supply chain, we maintain close relationships with certified, value-aligned partners and use Renoon's tool for supply chain transparency. These strategies have turned challenges into opportunities for growth and positive impact.



6. How does Endelea measure its impact on the environment and society, and what steps are you taking to improve this impact?

Endelea measures its environmental and social impact by adhering to GRI standards, reporting on economic, environmental, and social impacts, and setting improvement targets. As part of the B-Corp community, we're committed to meeting high environmental and social standards, with regular re-evaluations challenging us to enhance our impact. We integrate environmentally friendly practices into our operations and encourage our team to adopt sustainable habits in their daily lives. Employees play a key role in monitoring and assessing our sustainability, ensuring we meet our impact goals. As we grow, we're focused on innovative solutions to manage waste and reduce our environmental footprint, maintaining our commitment to sustainability while scaling our operations.



7. Can you describe Endelea's approach to transparency and accountability in its operations?

Endelea's approach to transparency and accountability is centered around its Code of Ethics and annual sustainability report. The Code of Ethics outlines principles and standards for operations in Italy and East Africa, ensuring alignment with our core values of sustainability and ethical conduct. The annual sustainability report serves as both a communication tool and a historical record, detailing our sustainable practices, achievements, and areas for improvement. Additionally, our partnership with Renoon enhances transparency, allowing consumers to track their garments via QR codes, from sourcing to final product, ensuring accountability in the supply chain and promoting eco-conscious consumption.



8. How does Endelea ensure that its products are accessible and affordable to a wide range of consumers while maintaining ethical and sustainable practices?

Endelea's approach to ensuring that its products are accessible and affordable while upholding ethical and sustainable practices, is multifaceted and carefully considered. Here's how we achieve this balance:

- **Online Shop Accessibility:** Our online store plays a crucial role in making our products widely accessible. It allows customers from various locations to easily browse and purchase our range of products, overcoming geographical barriers.
- **Pop-Up Stores in Diverse Cities:** We host pop-up stores in various cities, bringing our products closer to different communities. These temporary retail spaces not only increase accessibility but also offer customers a tangible experience of our brand and values.
- **Flagship Store in Milan:** Our flagship store in Milan serves as a central hub for our brand. It's not just a retail space but also a representation of our commitment to sustainable fashion, offering customers a unique shopping experience.
- **Inclusive Sizing:** We offer a wide range of sizes to cater to diverse body types, ensuring that our products are inclusive and accessible to a broader audience.

- **Transparent Pricing:** We maintain transparency in our pricing. Our website provides a detailed breakdown of product prices, explaining the value and the ethical and sustainable projects behind our clothes. This transparency helps customers understand the rationale behind our pricing, ensuring that it remains reasonable and justifiable.
- **Diverse Product Range:** Endelea's commitment to accessibility is further enhanced by our diverse product range, which includes not only clothing but also a home collection featuring items like tablecloths, napkins, and table sets. This variety of products allows us to offer several entry price points, catering to different budgetary needs.



9. What are Endelea's plans for future growth and expansion, and how do you plan to maintain your commitment to sustainability and ethics as you grow?

Endelea's vision for future growth and expansion is ambitious yet firmly rooted in our commitment to sustainability and ethics. As we scale up, our dedication to making a positive social impact remains the same, guided by our core values and strategic approaches.

Financial Commitment to Ethical Missions:

A cornerstone of our growth strategy is the continued allocation of 3% of our annual revenues to ethical missions. This commitment ensures that as Endelea grows financially, our social impact scales proportionally. The increased financial resources will enable us to engage in larger, more impactful projects, furthering our mission to create positive change.

Expansion Plans:

Our growth strategy includes reaching international markets, specifically targeting the US to introduce our unique fashion ethos globally. We plan to responsibly increase our production in East Africa, benefiting local communities while upholding ethical standards. Additionally, we anticipate forming new partnerships with certified, socially responsible suppliers across Africa and potentially other continents. We also aim to expand our product range, aligning with our sustainability ethos.

10. How does Endelea collaborate with other organizations and stakeholders to promote sustainability and ethical practices in the fashion industry?

Our partnership with Renoon exemplifies our commitment to transparency and reducing the environmental impact of the industry.

We also collaborate with Kechic, a Milanese social tailoring workshop, that blends Italian and African tailoring traditions. This collaboration aims at promoting the longevity of clothes and highlighting our dedication to sustainable fashion.

Finally, our collaboration with our partners in East Africa, creating the Cultural Committee, ensures that our operations and projects are infused with local wisdom and practices, maintaining cultural integrity and community empowerment.



Thank you for your cooperation on behalf of The Thinking Watermill Society. All the best in your current and future endeavours, Francesca.

Learn More about Endelea

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About The Thinking Watermill Society

The Thinking Watermill Society is a non-profit organization. In particular, it promotes the debate and exchange of ideas among its members regarding the changes underway in the economic, cultural and social landscape, together with the analysis of the consequences that said changes entail, so as to identify the possible opportunities of economic, cultural and social growth related to said changes.

Our headquarters are in Rome, Italy.

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