

Strength-Based Design in the Textile and Fashion Industry

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Introduction

The textile and fashion industry are fraught with unethical labour practices, environmental degradation and devastating impacts on biodiversity and climate [see Sark and Gotthardsen's as well as Hock and Kenel's chapter in this volume]. While the industry impacts the global economy substantially, it urgently needs a transformation towards sustainability encompassing social, ecological, economic and cultural dimensions (The British Council/Fashion Revolution India 2023). The sector's practices often compromise human rights, degrade ecosystems and contribute significantly to climate change, prompting widespread calls for more responsible and sustainable business models (Moreno-Gavara/Jiménez-Zarco 2019). Responding to these challenges, frameworks like Fair Trade have emerged, promoting ethical practices, social justice and the protection of the planet (Fair Trade Federation 2023) [see Anderson et al.'s chapter in this volume]. Fair Trade social enterprises aim to create an economy that supports both people and the environment by putting ecological and social responsibility before profit, fostering a regenerative and distributive economy that benefits society and the environment (Doherty et al. 2020).

A critical factor in transforming the fashion industry, both in Fair Trade and conventional systems, lies in fostering innovation that combines artisanal craftsmanship with sustainable design practices [see Lawson Jaramillo's as well as Bořa-Moisin and Winkler's chapter in this volume]. A central focus of Fair Trade is on equal cooperation with artisans that work with traditional craft skills. By integrating the cultural and ecological wisdom of artisans into contemporary fashion, Fair Trade not only preserves traditional techniques but also promotes a regenerative economy. This approach ensures that artisans are fairly compensated; it empowers communities, and bridges the gap between cultural heritage and modern sustainability goals, setting a precedent for ethical and ecological transformation in fashion.

To create socio-ecological transformation in the textile and fashion industry, it is important to rethink design processes, as design can directly influence sustain-

ability, innovation and equity across the sector. Design choices determine the materials used, the longevity of products and the efficiency of production processes, all of which have profound environmental implications. Thoughtful design can minimize waste, promote circularity through recyclability and reduce the carbon footprint of fashion items [see Salter's as well as Demandt and Gözet's chapter in this volume]. Moreover, a design process that actively includes artisans ensures that traditional, local craftsmanship is valued, promoting fair labour practices and preserving cultural heritage. By collaborating with artisans in the design process, the fashion industry can empower communities and create products that are not only innovative but also deeply connected to the skills and knowledge of these artisans, fostering sustainability in both the social and environmental dimensions.

Direct partnerships between designers and artisans can provide artisans greater market access and recognition of their cultural contributions [see Anderson et al.'s chapter in this volume]. To create these equitable global collaborations, it is essential to dismantle colonial-era frameworks first. Recognising and addressing power imbalances, particularly in 'North-South' (or: wealthier nations-global majority countries) partnerships, is crucial for empowering artisans as equal contributors rather than passive providers [see Lawson Jaramillo's as well as Boğa-Moisin and Winkler's chapter in this volume]. This shift allows for more culturally enriched fashion practices, where artisans' voices shape creative processes and contribute to diverse, meaningful designs.

This chapter explores the Strength-Based Design (SBD) approach as a pathway toward sustainability, creativity and equity in collaboration with artisans worldwide. SBD emphasises artisans' unique strengths and supports equal partnerships, promoting cultural sustainability while challenging power dynamics inherent in traditional collaborations. The chapter will outline the SBD methodology, present examples of its application, discuss its benefits and critically examine the obstacles and limitations of implementing this approach. Through this exploration, I will demonstrate how SBD can redefine collaborative dynamics within the fashion industry, valuing each partner's contribution and leading to sustainable and impactful results.

Redefining Partnerships in Fashion Design

The conventional fashion industry has long been criticised for its detrimental social and environmental impacts. Fast Fashion, characterised by rapid production cycles and disposability, has exacerbated these issues, leading to widespread labour exploitation and environmental harm (Fang/Boyi 2023). The dominance of this model leaves little room for ethical and sustainable alternatives, often relegating them to niche markets despite their obvious benefits.

In the current economy, artisans who continue using traditional skills and technologies often struggle to compete with cheaper, machine-manufactured goods and lack access to urban consumer markets (Emmett 2015). Those who migrate to cities in search of work frequently encounter exploitation by middlemen or are compelled to take on unskilled labour, leaving their traditional skills underutilised.

Fair Trade has emerged as an important movement questioning this unethical system and striving for social justice and sustainability in trading relations, particularly by working with artisans directly. However, despite its five-decade-long history, Fair Trade fashion remains marginal, struggling to gain mainstream traction due to various factors including a global economic system that leads to systemic exploitation, limited consumer awareness and market accessibility issues. Though Fair Trade and social enterprise models aim to establish fairer practices, underlying power imbalances persist, frequently leaving artisans as mere contributors rather than equal partners [see Lawson Jaramillo's as well as Boğa-Moisin and Winkler's chapter in this volume].

One critical aspect is that artisans often lack comprehensive insights into the production process and have limited awareness of the consumer market for their goods, leaving them economically marginalised and excluded from strategic decision-making (Emmett, 2015). Colonial legacies continue to shape global trade structures, where the decision-making authority largely rests with stakeholders from wealthier nations, which marginalises the perspectives of artisans from global majority countries, thereby sustaining paternalistic structures that undermine authentic equity and creativity in collaboration. These structural imbalances cast artisans as passive actors rather than recognising their rich knowledge and innovative potential. Only by actively valuing the leadership and insights of artisans can we move towards genuinely equitable and respectful collaborations and utilise the potential of artisanal skills, crafts and design for a sustainable development of the textile and fashion industry [see Marina et al.'s chapter in this volume].

Transforming partnerships requires designers and stakeholders from wealthier nations to seek and value leadership from artisans in global majority countries. To foster genuine partnerships, it is crucial to critically examine and dismantle colonial legacies. This involves not only addressing the overt power imbalances but also challenging the underlying assumptions and narratives that sustain them [see Sark and Gotthardsen's chapter in this volume]. This shift involves creating spaces for genuine dialogue, emphasising co-creation, and ensuring that the benefits of these collaborations are shared equitably. Arturo Escobar (1995) advocates for a partnership model that integrates the perspectives of historically marginalised groups into decision-making processes. By engaging artisans not only as producers but as leaders, the industry can foster more culturally enriched and impactful fashion practices that move beyond mere aesthetic appropriation.

The Strength-Based Design Approach

Strength-Based Design (SBD) is an approach within the textile and fashion industry that focuses on harnessing the inherent skills, cultural knowledge and unique traditions of artisans. Originating from principles that emphasise the empowerment of marginalised communities, SBD emerged as a response to the power imbalances and exploitative practices often found in collaborations between wealthier nations and global majority countries. Rooted in theories of social justice and post-colonial thought, SBD aligns with thinkers like Arturo Escobar, who advocate for genuine partnerships that value the voices and leadership of artisans from the global majority countries. This approach prioritises artisans as equal collaborators in the design process, recognising their cultural heritage and craftsmanship as integral to creating sustainable, high-quality products.

When translating the principles of Strength-Based Design (SBD) into practice, a structured, step-by-step approach is essential. This section provides a practical guideline aimed at practitioners—designers, social entrepreneurs, and other industry stakeholders—who seek to foster ethical, culturally respectful partnerships with artisans.

1. Engagement with Artisans:

- **Direct interaction:** Begin with direct engagement with artisans to understand their skills, techniques, and cultural heritage. This engagement involves field visits, interviews, and collaborative workshops, serving as the foundation for the design process.
- **Build trust and respect:** Establishing mutual trust and respect between designers and artisans is crucial. This involves open communication, transparency, and a commitment to ethical practices. Part of this is also self-reflection and the acknowledgement of pre-existing thought patterns of all parties involved.

2. Collaborative Design Process:

- **Co-creation:** Engage in a collaborative design process with artisans, ensuring their knowledge and expertise are central to product development. This step involves developing concepts that leverage the artisans' strengths and creating prototypes that are refined through iterative feedback.
- **Respecting craftsmanship:** This approach respects the artisans' craftsmanship and leads to innovative and culturally significant products.

3. Leveraging Existing Strengths:

- Focus on strengths: By concentrating on what artisans already do well, the design process becomes more efficient and less complex. This reduces the need for extensive retraining and allows for quicker implementation.
- Efficiency and simplicity: Avoiding unnecessary complexity in the design process helps maintain focus on what is achievable, fostering creativity while ensuring practicality and marketability.
- Promote cultural sustainability: Emphasise traditional craftsmanship and cultural heritage in the design process. This not only preserves cultural identity but also promotes the use of sustainable materials and methods.

4. Financial Planning and Assessment:

- Realistic financial planning: Conduct a thorough financial assessment to ensure products are economically viable. This includes cost analysis, pricing strategies, and market positioning.
- Collaboration on economics: Designers work closely with artisans to understand economic constraints and opportunities, ensuring transparent and realistic financial calculations.

5. Production Planning:

- Detailed plans: Develop detailed production plans considering the artisans' capacities and resources. This ensures the production process is efficient and scalable.
- Open communication: Always maintain open communication and shared decision-making to identify and address potential issues early on.

6. Implementation and Iteration:

- Smooth implementation: Once designs are finalised, begin the production process with close collaboration and open communication to promptly address any issues.
- Continuous improvement: Gather feedback from consumers and stakeholders post-market launch to ensure continuous improvement and adaptation.
- Foster collaboration: Promote open communication and shared decision-making between designers and artisans. This ensures that potential issues are identified and addressed early on, fostering sustainable collaboration.

7. Sustainable Collaboration:

- **Ongoing support:** Ensure ongoing support for artisans to maintain effective and sustainable collaboration. This involves continuous feedback loops and shared decision-making.

Strength-Based Design for Value Creation and Equal Partnership

Strength-Based Design (SBD) represents a transformative approach within the textile and fashion industry, seeking to harness the unique skills and cultural knowledge of artisans while fostering equitable collaboration. By centring on artisans' expertise, SBD respects traditional techniques and emphasises sustainable production practices that often align with ecological principles. Many traditional artisan practices, especially in textile production, have minimal carbon impact due to the reliance on natural, locally sourced materials and manual techniques (The British Council/Fashion Revolution India 2023). Furthermore, SBD has the potential to promote the preservation of biodiversity by using native fibres and plant-based dyes, which are often more environmentally friendly than synthetic alternatives. It also encourages slower, more mindful production cycles, reducing waste and overproduction. By fostering direct, ethical partnerships between designers and artisans, this approach can help create fairer economic opportunities, reduce dependency on industrial-scale manufacturing and support the revitalization of local economies. This method integrates artisans as full participants in the design process, fostering "a sustainable future through collective creativity and collaboration" (The British Council/Fashion Revolution India 2023).

For example, the UNHCR's *MADE51* initiative demonstrates the impact of SBD in empowering refugee artisans to preserve traditional crafts while accessing global markets. By connecting refugee artisans with social enterprises, *MADE51* builds on their skills and cultural heritage to create marketable products. The program has shown measurable success: participating artisans report increases in income stability and self-sufficiency, with many refugee groups achieving financial improvement and community integration through these partnerships (UNHCR 2023). The initiative's focus on artisans' strengths has allowed for quicker adaptation to market demands, highlighting SBD's potential to provide immediate economic value while upholding cultural integrity.

SBD supports value creation by integrating artisans' strengths directly into design processes, creating products that are both durable and culturally significant, often utilising natural and locally sourced materials to reduce environmental impact (Moreno-Gavara/Jiménez-Zarco 2019). *Womencraft*, a Tanzanian social enterprise, exemplifies this sustainable approach. *Womencraft* artisans produce high-

quality basketry that resonates with global consumers, creating products valued for their craftsmanship and eco-friendly production. *Womencraft's* model has led to significant economic and social impact, with artisans seeing increased income stability and greater recognition of their work in international markets. The enterprise has also empowered artisans to take leadership roles in community development, enhancing their economic resilience. Similarly, *WEAVE*, an organisation focused on empowering women artisans in Thailand, integrates SBD by connecting women to broader markets while preserving their cultural heritage. *WEAVE* has fostered economic independence and social equity, helping many artisans secure fair compensation and improved livelihoods.

Strength-Based Design offers significant opportunities to transform the fashion industry by fostering equitable partnerships that empower artisans. By providing artisans with access to global markets and supporting the use of sustainable, locally sourced materials, SBD enables them to thrive economically while preserving their cultural heritage. This approach encourages environmentally friendly production practices and the creation of unique, durable products that appeal to conscious consumers. Through direct collaboration between designers and artisans, SBD can help create a more sustainable and inclusive fashion ecosystem that values both ecological responsibility and fair economic opportunities.

Implementation Challenges and Practical Recommendations

There are several practical challenges that need to be addressed to ensure the effective and sustainable implementation of the SBD approach:

1. Cultural barriers

Differences in cultural contexts and communication styles can create misunderstandings and hinder collaboration. To address these, implementing cross-cultural training programs for both designers and artisans can be beneficial. Training modules focused on cultural awareness, communication techniques, and ethical considerations help bridge cultural divides, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

2. Economic constraints

Limited financial resources and market access can restrict the development and scaling of new designs. Effective financial planning and support mechanisms, such as microfinancing programs and grants and of course pre-financing of at least 50%, are crucial. Partnerships with ethical investment firms or social impact funds can

provide much-needed capital for artisans to invest in materials, equipment and training. In addition, designing programs that include basic financial literacy for artisans can support them in managing and planning their resources.

3. Skill gaps

Although SBD leverages artisans' existing skills, skill gaps may persist, especially in areas such as product consistency, quality control and business acumen. Targeted training and capacity-building programs can be established to upskill artisans. Workshops in areas like quality assurance, modern design trends, and digital literacy for e-commerce platforms can enhance artisans' competitiveness in broader markets.

4. Market access

One of the main obstacles for artisans is gaining access to broader, international markets. To address this, developing strategic partnerships with Fair Trade organisations, social enterprises, and e-commerce platforms can be highly effective. These partnerships offer artisans access to international markets and provide marketing support to enhance product visibility. Establishing dedicated online marketplaces and linking artisans with ethical fashion brands can also expand market reach.

5. Balancing tradition and innovation

Finding a balance between preserving traditional techniques and introducing innovative design elements requires careful consideration. Practitioners can use collaborative design workshops to encourage artisans and designers to co-create products that incorporate both traditional techniques and modern aesthetics. These workshops can feature prototype development sessions where artisans refine designs with iterative feedback, ensuring authenticity while enhancing appeal for contemporary markets.

6. Financial Constraints

Financial constraints often limit artisans' ability to invest in new designs or production techniques. To overcome this, SBD initiatives can incorporate financial planning support and access to small business grants or funding from sustainable fashion funds. Providing artisans with access to small business loans or developing partnerships with organisations that offer fair funding models can also aid artisans in meeting production and quality standards needed to reach larger markets.

Critical Discussion

While Strength-Based Design offers a transformative approach in the textile and fashion industry, it still faces several limitations in terms of impact. One key concern is its potential to remain confined to niche markets, limiting its broader influence on mainstream fashion practices. Although SBD emphasises sustainability and equity, its reliance on traditional techniques and slower production cycles can make it less competitive in industries driven by fast-paced, high-volume demands. This raises questions about its scalability and ability to influence systemic change across the global fashion sector.

Another limitation is the challenge of achieving measurable, widespread impact on artisans' livelihoods and environmental outcomes. While individual projects may demonstrate success, the broader adoption of SBD often depends on market dynamics that prioritise profit over cultural or ecological considerations. This can restrict SBD's ability to create lasting structural shifts in how fashion is produced and consumed, potentially confining its benefits to small-scale collaborations rather than driving industry-wide transformation.

Finally, while SBD emphasises the preservation of traditional practices, the integration of these techniques into modern markets can inadvertently commodify cultural heritage [see Boğa-Moisin and Winkler's chapter in this volume]. By framing artisan crafts as marketable assets, there is a risk of reducing their cultural significance to mere economic value, which could undermine the very traditions SBD seeks to protect. Addressing these impact limitations requires an ongoing commitment to ensuring that SBD not only benefits individual artisans but also drives broader, systemic change in the fashion industry.

Conclusion: A Guideline for Strength-Based Design

SBD offers a powerful and transformative approach for the textile and fashion industry, meeting the growing demand for ethical and sustainable practices while creating measurable benefits for businesses and artisans alike. By leveraging the existing skills and cultural heritage of artisans, SBD enhances creativity, promotes cultural sustainability and strengthens economic viability. This approach moves beyond traditional exploitative practices by fostering equitable production methods that prioritise fair compensation and ethical treatment—principles aligned closely with Fair Trade. Through practical applications of Fair Trade values, SBD contributes to the building of a more transparent, responsible, and humane fashion industry.

SBD integrates artisans as full participants in the design process, creating an inclusive, collaborative environment that respects their cultural knowledge. Programs like UNHCR's *MADE51*, *WEAVE* and *Womencraft* demonstrate the impact of SBD,

with artisans gaining stable incomes, enhanced market access, and opportunities to develop leadership within their communities. These programs show that SBD is not just about product creation; it is about fostering sustainable livelihoods and empowering artisans to play an active role in the creative economy.

While SBD shows significant promise, its successful implementation depends on tackling systemic inequalities and ensuring sustained economic and logistical support. Artisans often face challenges such as limited financial resources, market access, and balancing tradition with market trends. Through tools such as capacity-building, cross-cultural training, and strategic partnerships, SBD can support artisans in overcoming these barriers and fully realising their potential [see Marina et al.'s chapter in this volume].

In essence, SBD provides a framework that is both accessible and impactful, promoting collaboration, long-term value creation and sustainable business growth. By preserving traditional craftsmanship, fostering equal partnerships, and embracing Fair Trade principles, SBD aligns with the broader goals of social, ecological, economic, and cultural sustainability, making it a vital strategy for the future of the fashion industry.

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