



Ethical Lifestyle Initiative

# AFGHANISTAN

## LIFE AND WORK IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS



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### ***Back to Basics***

Fashion businesses adapt production lines for a different style of customer.

### ***Optimistic by nature***

Farmers take the crisis in their stride: we'll get through it, as we always have.

# THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING



In early March 2020, Europe was beginning to feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the US some people were starting to take notice; fewer to take action. Blissful ignorance reigned in much of the world.

Iran was a notable exception: the virus hit hard and early. Travel and work restrictions in early March left thousands of Afghan workers without an income. Many came home, crossing the border with few controls, potentially bringing the virus with them.

Already it was apparent to EFI that the virus would disrupt global supply chains, spelling disaster for small producers in developing countries. The response of major fashion brands (masks, gowns, some donations) was commendable, but inadequate. People in the global 'South' need #NotCharityJustWork. In crisis situations, brands can - and should - take steps to protect suppliers, safeguard livelihoods and ultimately save lives.

A globalized, interconnected world gives Western consumers unlimited choices, from the restaurants we go to, to the clothes we wear, to the technology we use. With the internet, our desires are granted at the touch of a button. Brands can now understand (and create?) consumer desires and satisfy them more efficiently. Spreading production across multiple suppliers in different countries, leveraging comparative advantages, means they can reduce input costs, time to market, stock and risk.

This model has allowed fashion houses - but also major tech brands, for example - to operate at dizzying margins. The same model, seen from the perspective of the producers, artisans and farmers that make the products, means fierce competition, tight margins, low wages and poor working conditions.

Globalization is wreaking havoc on the climate, too, risking the very existence of future generations. Our hyper-connected world provided ideal conditions for the virus to spread like wildfire. Global trade can be a powerful force for good, but maybe this pandemic shows us that it is in everyone's interest to make it more sustainable and producer-friendly.

COVID-19 will have far-reaching effects in Afghanistan, hence this special edition of our Newsletter. The EFI team and its social enterprises spoke at length with local artisans and farmers from the EFI network about how the pandemic is affecting them today and how it may change their work in the future. EFI projects aim to build resilience; these conversations showed that it's an attribute Afghans have in abundance.



# RESISTANT BY DESIGN



Resilience for social enterprises means finding new opportunities, products and markets. Zarif Design, for example, is making personal protective equipment (PPE) and distributing it to emergency workers, and Tarsian & Blinkley has won a government contract for uniforms. With air freight restrictions, SEs are finding customers closer to home and making simpler garments using whatever material they have. Commissions are less demanding and less lucrative, but it's a matter of survival for the next few months.

The EFI team is happy to share that not a single SE has laid off staff, despite sales and orders dropping and input costs rising for most SEs. Cashflow is challenging, with many expected payments delayed and

little government support to keep small businesses afloat during the crisis, but looking after valuable employees is a priority for all of our social enterprises.

Lockdown in Afghanistan coincided with silkworm season. Losing this year's harvest of cocoons would have been a severe blow to the women in rural areas waiting for silkworm eggs from the project. Fortunately, NGO partner RAADA has travel permits valid during the lockdown. Silkworm boxes were distributed to 3,500 women in early April. Growing conditions have been perfect for mulberry trees and the silkworms will be able to feast on fresh, green leaves.



*Silk farmer*  
© EFI



# LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Almost all interviewees are taking the threat seriously, going out less and washing their hands more. No immediate family members have been infected, but some have friends recovering after treatment or know returnees from Iran self-quarantined at home. Artisans are working from home in many cases, respecting official requests to avoid unnecessary travel.

Work continues at Saleh Fine Silks; employees wear face-masks and observe social distancing. At Tarsian and Blinkley half of the workforce is working from home, leaving more room for social distancing in the factory. Workers at the factory have their temperature checked on arrival and wear protective face-masks at all times.

The government has set up six COVID-19 hospitals, including one each in Herat and Kabul, but with social infrastructure devastated by years of conflict, ventilators, personal protective equipment and testing capacity are very limited. Realistically, citizens need to avoid getting infected, and stay at home to protect themselves and others.

Government health officials and prominent religious figures are all campaigning for compliance with public health measures. In a very traditional society, events marking Nowruz, the Persian New Year, were cancelled, and some mosques have been closed. Nevertheless, many are praying for Allah's help to beat the pandemic, inshallah.



*Social distancing on  
production lines at T&B*  
© Tarsian & Blinkley

# BRAND LOYALTY



Despite market uncertainties, brand partner and rising European ethical fashion label ZAZI Vintage, has confirmed Afghan social enterprises will work on its 2020 Autumn dress collection. ZAZI has worked with EFI SEs on previous collections of dresses and coats: Zarif Design for its Resort collection SS2019 and industrial partner Tarsian & Blinkley for the Raffaella coats that ZAZI launched in Autumn 2019.

For the new collection, RAADA and the Zendajan Silk Association will provide silk thread for embroidery, Saleh Mohammad will dye organic cotton sourced from ZAZI's network with natural dyes, and Tarsian & Blinkley will cut, stitch and tailor the dresses.

The pandemic is dampening consumer demand all over the world, potentially affecting sales of the new collection. For this reason, initially at least, lower quantities will be produced. Later, as demand becomes clear, production may be increased. By placing its confidence in the project's social enterprises and continuing to support ethical Afghan businesses, ZAZI guarantees rewarding work to talented Afghan artisans and concrete support to their families and communities.



T&B production for ZAZI  
© Tarsian & Blinkley



# UNBREAKABLE SUPPLY CHAINS

No-one imagined a pandemic was on its way last December when Italian luxury textile giant, Ratti, committed to introducing technology innovations to bring Afghan silk production in line with the most exacting market demands and to sourcing raw silk from the project's small producers in Zendajan, Herat, many of whom rear silkworms from eggs provided by the project.

Coronavirus hit the economy hard in Italy and many of Ratti's other markets. Nonetheless, its response has been inspiring: not only will it abide by the sourcing agreement, but it is actively pushing forward a pilot activity to produce 'vegan' silk from the cocoons reared by EFI's women silk farmers. Unlike

traditional methods, vegan silk allows the silk moth to complete its lifecycle, a major factor for Ratti's conscious consumers worldwide.

Ratti has long been known for taking calculated risks, innovating in production processes, while preserving the quality and tradition of Italian *alta moda*. More recently, it added social and environmental sustainability to its list of priorities. Investing in Afghan silk production during a pandemic may seem perilous to some, but Ratti remains convinced of the opportunity and has already requested samples for new product development. EFI and the women in Zendajan are only too happy to oblige.



Silk cocoons  
© EFI



## STORMY WEATHER

Social enterprises working in food are worried: lockdowns reduce access to markets at home and overseas, meaning lower sales and orders potentially unfulfilled. It's a concern particularly for saffron businesses, which bought their annual supply in recent, pre-COVID months at prices in line with good global demand at that time. They are now holding a lot of stock whose value may have decreased.

Quarter 1 sales are down by around 10% on 2019, with some SEs more affected than others in terms of postponed, cancelled or reduced orders. The main issues are access to export markets by air and uncertainty about the duration of the crisis. Restrictions are now being eased, but even when processing and packaging facilities were closed, SEs continued to take care

of their employees. Cashflow will be challenging until sales resume, particularly for SEs that used their savings and bank credit lines to buy saffron and other farm produce after the harvest. One interviewee estimated it will take two years for business to get back to normal. Others were more pragmatic and recognised that no one really knows.

For some SEs Coronavirus is less of a concern than political infighting that could derail efforts to find a lasting peace in Afghanistan. Social enterprises, farmers and artisans agree on one point: COVID-19 is a passing cloud compared to the storm they lived through for decades.



*Processing almonds while social distancing*  
© zibafoods



## A SUNNY OUTLOOK

Farmers supplying the project's social enterprises working in fine foods are perhaps the least concerned about the pandemic. Most continue to work the land as usual, can find seeds and inputs in local markets and do not expect major impacts of the harvest, which is some months away. Lockdowns prevent them from selling in large cities, but village markets are working as usual and most are confident the crisis will blow over in two to three months.

Rural residents mention between 20 and 400 returnees from Iran now in their community, but all are reported healthy or at least recovering. Silk farmers, normally women who combine this seasonal work with other jobs, were able to get EFI boxes of silkworm eggs, but some fear they may not be able to sell the cocoons or home-spun yarn at a good price.

Saffron growers and processors (mostly women) are concerned about price fluctuations for saffron on world markets, and about local inflation especially for imported staples. Interviewees from farming communities say they appreciate and follow government guidelines, although media reports suggest low levels of compliance in both rural and urban areas. Many in rural areas show an interest in the science, like the virus's jump from animals to humans, although a few buy into dubious "facts": direct sunlight kills the virus, for example.



*Saffron farmer in happier times*  
© Farzana Wahidy / EFI



# GOOD FOOD NEWS

UK-based specialty retailer, Wunder Workshop, is to launch a range of saffron products, including herbal tea as well as the precious spice itself. The products are being made and packaged by Ariana Saffron in Herat and will be shipped as soon as conditions permit. The EFI project is pleased to have facilitated this partnership, enabling Wunder Workshop to add premium Afghan saffron to its product range and giving Ariana not only additional sales, but also the chance to develop innovative saffron-based products together with Wunder.

Ziba, a pioneering Afghan social enterprise specialising in exports of high-quality dry fruit and nuts, showed remarkable foresight in managing lockdown risks: a few

days before Afghanistan halted international flights, the company shipped a large consignment to a warehouse in the US, its main overseas market.

Ziba has developed excellent order fulfilment capacities, with more and more retail customers buying online through its website and third-party platforms like Amazon and Shopify. Last August, with EFI support, Ziba embarked on the organic certification process, which will further expand its options in US and European markets.



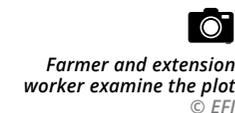
# JUST IN TIME

EFI is best known for luxury fashion, which in Afghanistan means silk. Silk begins life on a farm. Silkworms feed on leaves from mulberry trees, which shelter crops like saffron, fruit and nuts, much sought after by food connoisseurs worldwide. Hence EFI Afghanistan's integrated approach to food and fashion, to multiply value and create better livelihoods, in particular for returnees and displaced people.

A careful combination of crops with good drought resistance, nutritional qualities and market demand maximizes income for small farmers and could be transformative. The local EFI team worked closely with the Directorate of Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock (DAIL), Herat University (HU), NGO partner RAADA, village councils and social enterprises to identify crops, sites and farmers for demonstration plots.

The plots they selected are in five districts in Herat province where most silk and saffron are processed. This ensures integration right along the value chains, from agriculture to sericulture, to artisans and social enterprises who process the cocoons into silk thread, dye it and weave it into fabric for use in garments.

Preparatory activities began in late 2019, in time for planting and farmer training in the Spring. Then COVID-19 arrived. Fortunately, DAIL, HU and RAADA extension officers have a capillary presence and all 25 plots were active by the end of April. All are looking forward to a good harvest later in the year.





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**Zarif Design distributed masks to employees and their families**  
© zarifnyc



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