“This has been an amazing year, and I am not going to ask: "What next? Where do you go from here?"
The truth is, I don’t really know what’s next.
What I do know is how I got here.

I am here because my grandfather Hesbon Nyong’o, who was born in the early 1900s and died on this day, eight years ago, believed in and supported the education and advancement of women in Kenya. He encouraged the desire of my grandmother, Dorka, to go into business for herself, and to have some financial independence. He stood by her when she joined women’s advancement initiatives. He sent all his children to school, four boys and seven girls.

And before our independence in 1964, he was sitting on the board of a school for girls. Earlier today, we asked my grandma why he cared so deeply about women’s position in society and she said she had never asked him why. He just did it. With this support, in an otherwise hostile world for women, my grandmother flourished, and at 94 today – the only surviving member of her women’s union – she is still working to build a hostel for girls to keep them safe from physical harm as they pursue their education.

I am here because my grandpa and my grandma raised my father to espouse those beliefs in the value of women. And he, in turn, joined forces with my mother, a woman raised free of gender restrictions. And they together raised me, with the same beliefs, that to be a woman is to be human, and to be human is to seek perfection and find joy in never attaining it.

That though what has happened for me so far has felt incredible, I am still a work in progress and always hope to be.

I stand here not knowing what is next. What I do know is that I am here, in this moment, because I was raised in a family of unconditional love and support. An environment that assumed my strength, my ability, my power. I want to express how grateful I am for that, while also understanding that women around the world are not yet always taught by their immediate environment that they are strong, powerful, beautiful and equal. I know that, as I contemplate what is next, I want to honour the legacy of my family and help us create a better future for young women around the world.

Thank you.”

Speech delivered at Glamour Awards, New York, United States, 2014.
The 2016 Finalists
Mariana Andrea Nallim
CEO and Founder, RECICLARG Recycling Technology
ARGENTINA

“I always look for opportunities that others don’t see. My search is for the unknown.”
Every year, 42 million tons of electronic waste is generated globally. In Argentina, each person generates 7 kilos of e-waste per year, on average. It is among the countries with the fastest-growing urban waste zones, as a result of the rapidly expanding market of electronic products and the accelerating speed at which they become obsolete.

Reciclarg was created in 2010 in order to recycle electronic waste. It is a certified “blue economy” company, established with the aim of altering the way in which production processes are usually run and tackling resulting environmental problems, shifting from the use of rare and high-energy-cost resources to solutions based on simpler and cleaner technologies. The company is inspired by circular economy principles, namely it leans towards zero waste and zero pollution by optimizing the whole production system in an integrated manner.

Reciclarg offers the following integrated services:
1. Collection of and active search for electronic waste generated by individuals and companies.
2. Separation and recycling of materials to be used as raw inputs.
3. Reuse of materials, through rehabilitation and reparation of products for bottom-of-the-pyramid users or for the creation of spare parts that can extend the life of existing electronic devices.
4. Upcycling, through the design and production of sustainable products using residual materials that would find no other use.
5. Awareness raising and training of private citizens and company employees about the problems generated by e-waste and the optimal way to deal with it.

Reciclarg has three permanent employees and three temporary employees (on a rotational basis) who are part of a training programme offered by the Ministry of Labour. It also opens its doors every six months to a group of unemployed young people between ages 18 and 24 (half of whom are young girls), who follow a programme put in place by the Ministry of Labour aimed at completing their schooling and improving their employability.

For Andrea, the main challenge in setting up her company was that recycling is a business that is usually dominated by men and managed in the informal economy. She had to introduce a new concept of recycling waste, which is based on a formal and entrepreneurial way of running the business. As a first step, she started working with public institutions from the city of Mendoza, participating in public biddings and organizing communication campaigns to sensitize the public to the need for sustainable consumption and production. She is now engaged in the elaboration of municipal regulations for handling e-waste.

The Empretec workshop was instrumental for Andrea in learning to plan and set goals on a regular basis. She came to understand what her main strengths and weaknesses were, and thanks to that she could improve her negotiating skills, which had a positive impact on a deal during a recent opportunity-seeking business trip in China. She also realized how important it was to share plans with her employees and make each of them feel like they were part of the company. Celebrations of personal and common achievements are now a habit atReciclarg.

Reciclarg offers integrated services to decontaminate the region of Mendoza from all kinds of technological waste. It currently recycles 5 of the 7.5 tons of e-waste generated in the region. In the last three years, its turnover has increased by 300%. In 2016, the sale of sustainable products made from recycled residual materials is expected to grow by 70%, and it plans to export to Belgium as part of a development plan. If this trend continues, Reciclarg will move to a larger production plant.
Bonou Née Zanou Berthe

Director of the Akpakpa Paediatric Clinic

BENIN

“We face competition by providing quality service to our clients”
Berthe Bonou-Zanou is the director of the Akpakpa Paediatric Clinic in Cotonou, founded 19 years ago. It is the first private clinic in Benin to offer health care to children from birth to age 17. It provides consultation services for infants in differing states of health, as well as nutritional advice and an extended range of vaccination programmes and biological exams. It can also provide hospitalization and surgical consultation. The quality of the services and the round-the-clock availability of highly qualified staff is what makes the Akpakpa Paediatric Clinic stand out.

To remain competitive in a market that is attracting more competitors, the Akpakpa Paediatric Clinic reorganized its mode of functioning in order to remain competitive. After an Empretec workshop, Berthe and her associate decided to establish a procedures manual and ensure its implementation. They also decided to disclose their corporate policy and their vision, fixed short-term and long-term objectives. As a result, quality management has been strengthened and there is greater motivation among staff. They implemented a suggestions box to ask their patients for feedback on the quality of the services provided. For example, to increase the clientele, the clinic offered expectant mothers their first ultrasound pictures. Pictures also decorate the waiting rooms, giving a welcoming and warm atmosphere to the clinic. Revenues grew 10 per cent after these changes took place.

Akpakpa Paediatric Clinic contributes to sustainable development through the quality and affordability of the health care services provided. The clinic recommends early care of diseases in order to prevent their development. This reduces the long-term cost of health care and the impact on household revenues, thereby freeing funds for other economic activities.

The clinic also provides stable employment for 33 employees and temporary positions for 6 staff. Continuous education is provided to employees, with two doctors being sent each year to national or international congresses. Great importance is placed on knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer, from developed to developing countries, but also within developing countries. The clinic also contributes to gender empowerment by employing women, who constitute 85% of their staff.

The clinic’s revenues grew from US$336,173 in 2012 to US$355,505 in 2014. In the future, Akpakpa would like to increase its capital stock, hire more paediatricians, strengthen the department of neonatology, further develop the laboratory and extend its service so as to include all the subspecialties. Cotonou has five paediatric clinics, making the competition tight. Therefore, the clinic has ambitions to expand its coverage regionally.
“Through media communication and social networks we promote community-based development, environmental protection and self-employment.”
Mayra’s dynamic business, Programa Buenos Negocios, is a pioneering company using multimedia (TV, radio and press) to focus on promoting entrepreneurship and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through media communication. She has developed a variety of radio and TV shows, documentaries, mini-series and a radio reality show on entrepreneurship, among which the acclaimed “An Entrepreneur is Born”. Mayra is a pioneer in this area: the reality show has received international prizes for being highly motivational and highly scalable, considering that it has generated a book, an evening TV show, a diploma and local conferences based on the same concept.

Entrepreneurs can benefit from the advice of experts who participate in the programme but can also get in contact with Mayra to receive personalized consultancy services on how to set up a new business, how to improve a strategic plan, how to introduce a new management model in the current business, how to improve the organization of production through coaching or how to upgrade the entrepreneurial skills of a manager and his/her team. To differentiate her business, Mayra has recently started to provide advisory services on sustainability and social responsibility, and to support entrepreneurial initiatives led by women and marginalized communities. Her radio/TV show “Programa Buenos Negocios” has taken an active part in campaigns to promote reforestation, biodiversity, women’s entrepreneurship and micro-entrepreneurs.

Mayra’s staff is composed of a team of 10 people: 3 presenters, 4 thematic experts, 2 employees dealing with public relations and sales, and 1 secretary. The team is very committed, fully empowered and personally involved in the conceptualization and implementation of all projects, including networking and public events. Mayra also leads highly appreciated well-attended networking events called “Tardes de PYMEs” (SME evenings). She is also the former president of the Women Entrepreneurs Association of the Dominican Republic (2008–2010).

The Empretec workshop transformed Mayra both as a person and as an entrepreneur. As she recalls: “Empretec helped me to become more dynamic, to delegate and to create a comprehensive follow-up system, including personalized project proposals, regular contacts and personal visits”. The workshop also helped her to face competition and modify her business model. “In this industry”, adds Maya, “age and experience bring prestige, but I need to be very innovative and creative in order to remain competitive”.

“Programa Buenos Negocios” is broadcast by the third highest ranked national TV network. In less than three years, followers and voting participants rose from 7,000 to 70,000. In 2012, changing market conditions, macroeconomic instability and the need to reduce financial costs meant the company had to concentrate on its core activity (the radio business). Subsequently, it attracted new investors, strategic partners and sponsors, and increased the company’s revenues by 30%. In 2015, Mayra was nominated Radio Announcer of the Year for the production of “An Entrepreneur is Born”. She is now back on TV with a new TV show for SMEs.
“Our cosmetic products are 100% organic. We respect the environment, contribute to conserving our land and promote our culture and traditions.”
Isabel Toaquiza started her business in 2013, after attending the Empretec workshop the year before in Quito. Her company, Pachigen, makes cosmetic products from organic ingredients grown by small farmers in the northwestern reserves of Pichincha province. These body and facial care lotions and creams are based on ancient wisdom from the pre-Inca Yumba culture, and this is the company’s distinguishing feature: the resources come from natural elements (water, plants, fruits, seeds) from the land where the communities live and based on practices that belong to their cultural heritage.

Another remarkable aspect of Pachigen’s business model is the economic empowerment of women and local communities. In addition to employing mostly women in manufacturing the cosmetics, Isabel and her company are part of a management committee working with 23 local communities, whose goal is to promote local development through land conservation and biodiversity. Empowering women who take care of the crops, valuing the social impact of economic activities and preserving the Yumba identity are core values of Pachigen.

Among the competencies learned during the Empretec workshop, Isabel acknowledges that goal setting and opportunity seeking were, and still are, the two she relied on the most to open her business and to make it grow, almost doubling its sales turnover in just two years. She admits: “The Empretec workshop also helped me to get rid of many cultural paradigms and preconceptions about my role as a woman and a mother which were restraining me.” She adds: “The way I inspire and motivate my team is to show, and make sure, that the success of Pachigen is the success of all of us. I commit myself to fulfilling the dreams of the people who work shoulder to shoulder with me.”

The company currently sells its products directly to spas and in a shopping mall. Isabel is determined to expand production and prepare the products in a laboratory that meets all the required health standards. With a properly set-up production plant, she hopes to brand Pachigen’s organic products and become competitive in national and regional markets.

The cosmetics industry is one of the most profitable in Ecuador. At US$1.1 billion sales per year, the industry is among the five most important economic sectors in Ecuador and the country’s fourth largest importer. The cosmetics industry has registered a sustained growth of about 10% annually. In its first two years of operation (2013 and 2014), Pachigen reported annual sales totalling US$44,000 and US$74,000, respectively.
Ms. Fatou Saine Gaye

CEO and Founder, Gaye Njorro Hair Plus (Foundation for The Empowerment Of Youth)

THE GAMBIA

“I have a mission: getting young people off the streets”.
In 2005, after studying in the United Kingdom for 10 years and graduating with a degree in banking and finance, Fatou moved back to the Gambia for a job in banking. However, she then decided to become an entrepreneur in order to achieve work-life balance and also to follow her passion as a hair stylist, which she had pursued part time while in the United Kingdom. In 2007, Gaye Njorro Hair Plus opened, initially as a hairdressing salon. Two years later, after Fatou saw the vulnerability of young girls in the streets, she transformed it into a skills training centre for hairdressing, beauty cosmetology and massage therapy. The centre was then fully licensed and accredited by the National Training Authority of the Gambia. In that first year it started with 14 students. They all graduated and either found job opportunities or started their own businesses.

Fatou built a network with key stakeholders like the Social Development Fund (SDF), the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the National Youth Service Scheme. With their support, the centre enrolled 50 students. After the success of the second graduation, the centre attracted new partners, such as the United Nations Development Programme, which supported the opening of a new skills training centre – the Foundation for the Empowerment of Youth – at the border in the North Bank Region. The objective was to start tackling the issue of illegal youth migration by teaching them to be independent and self-reliant. Fifty more young people joined the new centre and graduated. Fatou then also engaged with the Ministry of Trade and Regional Integration and accessed funding through the Ecowas Spanish Fund for Migration for youth training, in order to expand efforts to curb illegal migration. With this funding, the skills centre added new programmes such as catering, tailoring and information technology. Thanks to this expansion, overall revenue increased by 65% and Fatou is expecting a further 10% increase.

The centre also works with vulnerable youth and has sponsored four disabled young people. The centre has offered employment to two of the disabled students and to other past trainees who are powerful role models.

On the basis of these contributions, the Ministry of Youth and Sport appointed Fatou as a board member of the National Enterprise Development Initiatives (NEDI) to promote youth and enterprise development. Through further networking, a partnership with Moore University of Hair Design, based in the United States, made it possible to provide the first online hairdressing course in the Gambia. Other partners abroad have offered mentorships and grants. Since the Empretec training, Fatou always seeks new opportunities. “When people are worried about something, I take it as an opportunity and act on it to turn it into a business reality. For example, when the Government sees the problem of illegal migration, I take the opportunity of adding hard skills to my curriculum to encourage more youths to be trained and be self-reliant and stay in their community and work”.

The Gambia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with over 60% of the population living below the poverty line and with a high percentage of youth unemployment. Since 2009, the Foundation has trained and certified over 1,200 youths in various disciplines. Eighty percent of the trainees are gainfully employed, some have their own businesses, some have been recruited by the skills centre, others work abroad and the rest are employed by reputable institutions in the country. By age group, young people between 18 and 35 years are the largest founders of start-ups in the country.
More than selling a product, BHOGA inspires a healthy and balanced lifestyle.”
Gladys is the founder and managing director of BHOGA, a Guatemalan company that sells cosmetics created and developed by Guatemalan women, taking advantage of the benefits that nature provides.

Bhoga is a Sanskrit word that means “joy and enjoy in all its forms”. BHOGA’s cosmetic products are 100% natural, using elements such as cereals, sea salt, dried herbs and pure vegetable oils. In addition, they are free of chemicals, preservatives, dyes and artificial fragrances; friendly to the environment; and certified by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). BHOGA offers completely safe and reliable products in their pure form, working in synergy with nature, transforming raw material into natural cosmetics.

BHOGA contributes to the country’s human development by improving health and well-being in people who use its products. It also empowers women, since the BHOGA team personnel and several of its suppliers have predominantly female employees. As family economies rely on Guatemalan women, their income generates additional opportunities for their children’s development. BHOGA is currently in an initial phase of entering the domestic market, where it is experiencing positive acceptance and constant growth.

There is a global trend towards the consumption of products that are natural, eco-friendly, non-aggressive to the body and without added chemicals. Guatemala, with one of the most important ecosystems in the world, has taken the lead in the production of seeds, plants, oils and other products from its forests, wetlands and jungles. From 2013 to 2015, BHOGA grew its sales by 75%. As the country regained political stability, the incorporation of Mayan culture in economic and political life has gained momentum as never before. Aware of these everyday realities, BHOGA focuses on 100% natural products, transforming but not changing the chemical composition of the raw materials, thus maintaining their purity.

“The Empretec workshop had a huge impact not only on the company but also on my personal life. I feel empowered and have developed my managerial skills. Thanks to Empretec, the dream of creating a cosmetic company became a reality,” says Gladys.

Consumers nowadays look for natural cosmetics that replicate the social and environmental values being adopted by society. BHOGA is developing its presence in the domestic market, which is responding favourably and displaying constant growth. The next step is to tap into the opportunities arising from growing international markets. As an example, the North American natural cosmetics market has surpassed the US$5 billion mark with over 600 brands on sale, with the highest growth in the “truly natural” market. BHOGA has carefully incorporated the market trends in its product formulation.
“Our imperatives are to establish credibility by exceeding customer expectations and receiving gratification by impacting lives.”
Dr. Vinaya Shetty is the founder and president of VIN Management Consultants (VIN), established in 2001. The company objective is to effect change in organizations with particular attention to social issues. The ultimate objective is to transform individuals and to create a cultural context for change.

Since 16 December 2012, after the tragic Nirbhaya rape case, there has been a radical change in the definition of rape in the judicial system in India. Government bodies have had to address this burning issue. When the Mumbai Police planned to create two squads within the police force, one to spread awareness and the other to be a unique helpline for women, VIN was given the task of executing the plan. The first squad is called Right To Freedom. Fifty-five police personnel, mainly women, were trained, coached and counselled to take part in one of the largest citizen outreach programmes in the country. Housing societies, schools and colleges would, for the first time, have police personnel visit them and educate women on their rights, explaining the law against sexual harassment. The second squad is called Save My Number. It provides online assistance to women in distress. VIN’s services support the tackling of serious issues such as child abuse. Working closely with police personnel to develop qualities such as integrity, sensitivity and compassion as well as social skills has led to positive results in the handling of cases of child abduction.

Further positive contributions have been brought to the entertainment industry in India, one of the fastest growing in the world, and especially Bollywood, in Mumbai. By addressing work practices and culture as well as compliance with labour-laws, VIN enables companies in this sector to improve their professional set-up, resulting in reduced stress, higher productivity and an enhanced sense of employee rights and having an impact on the community at large.

In 2012, Vinaya participated in the Empretec programme in Geneva. The key benefits she derived were the motivation to develop her company with renewed vigour and a deeper understanding of her company persona. The methodology facilitated reflection on possible directions for the business. This resulted in the pursuit of projects contributing to community development, by supporting Government programmes. One of the biggest challenges is retaining talent, as many women in India take a break after marriage or childbirth, often due to pressure from in-laws. The solution to this challenge has been to offer flexible scheduling, to create a larger network of professionals available for assignments, and to incentivize workplace contributions.

VIN has a growth rate of 15% per year and currently employs six full-time staff. Future projects include the development of a large telephone and online (Skype) network to extend support and motivation to women entrepreneurs in various countries, using digital media to provide access to training, ideas and counselling.

VIN provides professional personnel training programmes, achieving results such as reduced stress, higher productivity and the development of important behavioural qualities – and ultimately the development of benefits for entire communities.
Aline Wong

Founder and Managing Director of L’Inattendu Ltée, Owner and Designer of the trademark L’In

MAURITIUS

“I look into avenues of innovation and technology in order to expand”.
L’Inattendue, founded in 1988 by Aline Wong, produces garments for well-known brands in the clothing industry. It provides its customers with everything from simple logo embroidery to fully fledged customized solutions. In 2004, it established its own brand: “L’In”. L’Inattendue developed an in-house design department, which offers its customers screen printing, integral print solutions and handmade embroidery carried out by about 20 women working from home. The company has 75 employees, 95% of whom are women. The company owns two shops and maintains three corners in other shops.

Aline’s business operates in three types of markets: the main export market is France, including the nearby island of La Réunion. “This is considered a niche market, which helps the company to keep in touch with market trends and international standards”, affirms Aline. The United States market is a recent target, to diversify the company’s customer base, manufacturing standards and types of fabric produced. However, the most interesting venture for her business is the market development of her own brand. This segment is growing – it is about 16% of L’Inattendue’s total output and brings about $400,000 in sales revenue. Sales in the local market helped the company to fare better during the financial crisis and recession in Europe, when unfavourable exchange rates saw sales in clothes drop abruptly and cotton prices of cotton rise. At the same time, non-traditional local markets are not mature enough for L’Inattendue to switch its customer segment completely.

The company stays ahead of competition by focusing on quality and providing flexible solutions. Conscious of environmental challenges, L’Inattendue constantly monitors the waste it produces. It trains its operators to optimize the use of machines so as to reduce energy costs, it has adopted “green” fabric-washing practices and is seeking to use natural fibre that requires less water to create (in comparison with cotton). L’Inattendue stresses the “human” in human resources management. The major strength of the company, Aline says, is its strong commitment to its employees, which has been built over the years. In the future, L’Inattendue would like to further expand its own brand, making greater use of innovation and technology in its production chain. It would also like to franchise the brand. The three to five years ahead are a challenging phase that Aline hopes will see the brand gain more market share.
Joyce Kyalema
CEO/Founder of Josmak International Ltd
UGANDA

“We have a mission to produce highly valued and quality products profitably in an environmentally sustainable manner. As a social enterprise, when the business grows, the community is also transformed”.
Joyce Kyalema is the founder and managing director of Josmak. The company’s business is unique in the way that it uses pumpkin, a common household food, transforming and exploiting all aspects of this natural resource.

It produces pumpkin juice, pumpkin wine and ready-to-eat roasted pumpkin seeds, as well as pumpkin powder from leaves and flowers which is used to make bread, cookies, biscuits, bagias, soup, seeds, peanut butter, and pumpkin ginger and cinnamon tea spices, among other products. The remains are also used as animal food and organic fertilizer. The company sells its products to supermarkets, traders, restaurants and hotels, and institutions such as schools and hospitals. Joyce founded Josmak in 2013 and participated in the Empretec workshop in 2014. In two years, Josmak has doubled its sales revenue in all the product lines. The workforce has grown from 3 permanent staff to 5, plus 30 part-time employees.

The company’s social and environmental concerns show that reconciling sustainability and value creation is not contradictory. Joyce says that her business is growing thanks to the social, environmental and economic value it is able to produce. Josmak uses a social entrepreneurship model that supports sustainable agricultural practices in rural areas. Partnering with several local and international organizations to maximize the social value of her business, Joyce buys pumpkins from 80 women farmers in rural areas of Uganda. The company’s organically grown produce attracts more customers. The business also benefits disadvantaged women by bringing them together in groups that collaborate to contribute produce for the company. The social enterprise model benefits the community, and the company’s philosophy is that as the business grows, the community is also transformed.

The company has plans for the future: in the short term, it intends to diversify into processing other vegetables and fruits such as carrots, tomatoes and chili sauce, and pineapples and berries, among others. In the medium term, it would like to set up a bigger pumpkin processing plant and become, in the long term, the leading supplier of pumpkin products worldwide.

Organic trade can be a driving force in making agriculture more sustainable, especially if price premiums provide incentives for farmers to engage in improved practices, notably with regard to nutrient, pest and disease management. Josmak International has thus beautifully combined the environmental, social and economic components of a sustainable business model that will be needed to resolve future challenges.
Graciela Crescini

Director, Oway Sports

URUGUAY

“Oway ‘goes’ to sports people: we consult with and listen to the athletes, so we can design sportswear and accessories that best suit their needs and expectations.”
Graciela Crescini loves sports and started producing sportswear, initially, as a side activity to her paid job. After participating in the Empretec workshop and accessing Empretec Uruguay’s consultancy and advisory services, she realized that there was actually a market opportunity for her business idea.

“The turning point in the history of Oway was when I took the decision to quit the job place where I spent my last 18 years, to devote myself entirely to my business ventures”, recalls Graciela looking back at 2013. She adds: “It was risky, because I gave up the economic security on which both myself and my daughter were depending. I was confident about myself and my business idea, though. I knew that my project would be successful only if I put myself 100% into it.”

Oway manufactures professional sports garments that are specifically designed to suit both individuals and groups who are practicing sports for leisure or for competition. The garments are made through a process of listening and consulting with sports people. This means that the clothing fits the requirements of each sport with greater precision, as disciplines vary in terms of effort and movement. Oway is also the only Uruguayan brand especially designed for athletes with disabilities or special needs. The company also sponsors emerging athletes and sports that are less well known, thus helping them advance in their career and, at the same time, promoting her brand and sport outfits.

The production process involves customers in designing clothes, suppliers in identifying materials and garments, dressmakers and seamstresses in manufacturing the outfits, and athletes, sporting groups and organizations in distribution and marketing. This is what creates the feeling that everyone is part of a community, which goes beyond the product or service.

A particular aspect of Graciela’s business model is that it relies on minimizing fixed costs. This enables her to be competitive and offer good-quality sportswear and accessories at prices that are lower than those of her competitors. She does not have employees, at the moment; instead, she works with a network of companies and individuals – mostly women – with whom she enters into contract agreements for specific tasks (e.g. accounting, communication and social media, small workshops that manufacture garments). It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that the competencies she learned from Empretec and that she has been applying the most in her business are persuasion, networking and planning.

The sportswear and sport accessories market is growing, not only in Uruguay but at a global level. Healthier lifestyles are followed by an increasing number of people who practice sports for leisure and competition: an estimated 40,000 people in Uruguay and more than 1.5 million people in MERCOSUR. Since the beginning of Graciela’s venture two years ago, annual sales have tripled. She is now looking at how to expand her business with short-term and medium-term goals to get the Oway brand known in national and regional markets by forming strategic partnerships with gyms, fitness centres and workshops.
“We strive to promote a sustainable lifestyle.
Our goal is to preserve the weaving culture of our villages”.

Tran Thi Viet
Managing Director, Viet Trang Handicraft
VIET NAM
Tran Thi Viet is the founder and managing director of Viet Trang Handicraft, a company with a long history of handicraft production that specializes in natural fibres such as seagrass, jute, water hyacinth, corn leaves and banana leaves, and bamboo. One hundred per cent eco-friendly, the products are made without any chemical substances. The natural fibres are handwoven by talented and passionate women artisans, located in the oldest traditional seagrass-weaving villages of Thanh Hoa Province.

Annually, Viet Nam exports more than US$100 million in handicraft products, made of natural fibres, to the European Union. Tran Thi Viet has differentiated her products by integrating modern design and using a combination of materials inspired by local traditions. In 2013, the company’s sales amounted to US$115,000 and rose to US$185,000 in 2014 and to US$360,000 in 2015, thanks to increased exports. In parallel, the number of full-time employees rose from 10 to 35 and the number of weavers from 100 to 250. Their monthly income also increased by 40% in those three years. Part of the company’s profits are regularly spent on vocational training activities for the employees. At the managerial level, all of the nine posts are occupied by women.

In 2012, Viet Trang Handicraft was in danger of bankruptcy due to the withdrawal of one core buyer. Tran Thi Viet had to decide whether to continue with traditional products or move up the quality ladder towards higher-segment products attuned to the export markets. As a single mother with five daughters, in a tight financial situation, Tran Thi Viet spent sleepless nights trying to make the right decision. Encouraged by her youngest daughter, who had just graduated from one of the top business schools in the capital, she decided to seek financial support from relatives and banks. She also seized opportunities to obtain support from international and national organizations such as CBI (Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries), Vietrade, Vietcraft and Hanoi Design Center, in order to improve her products and company image, targeting higher-end markets. Gradually, her persistence and demand for quality paid off, and her products started to be exported to Europe and to the United States, and to meet the demands of responsible consumers who were asking not only for high-quality products but also for products that meet social, cultural and environmental values. In 2015 the company’s exports had quadrupled, compared with 2012.

This success can also be ascribed to the Empretec workshop. Tran Thi Viet recalls: “Since I attended the training course, I do set goals, both short-term and long-term, for everything I do. Besides, I became more persistent in demand for quality, which was key to introduce a new look for the company and to expand and improve our product range”. She also learned to share her vision with her weavers and farmers along with her ultimate goal of preserving the weaving culture of her village. Before becoming an “empreteca” she was convinced that being a well-paid employee in a big company would offer the best future for her daughters, but after attending the Empretec workshop she asked her daughters to work with her, getting inspired together and becoming more proud than ever of their achievements.

In the future, Tran Thi Viet would like to learn how social business models work and how to pursue social, environmental and cultural objectives while doing business.

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