

Green shoe brand helps Ethiopia walk tall

By [Megan Rowling](#)

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Brightly coloured shoes, boots and sandals, handmade in Ethiopia, nestle in tyres and wooden pallets hung with ropes on the white walls of this former butcher's shop in Gràcia, a fashionably bohemian district of Barcelona, Spain.



Ethiopian soleRebels store, Barcelona, Spain

On a warm weekday afternoon, trade is quiet - but soleRebels footwear is gaining in popularity, staff say. Fans include locals in their 30s, elderly people who find the shoes comfortable yet attractive, parents with adopted Ethiopian children and Germans living in the city.

The shop opened three years ago, and is one of 20 stores worldwide selling distinctive shoes made from recycled tyres, leather from free-range animals and cloth hand-woven by Ethiopian artisans in the poor community of Zenabwork/Total, a suburb of the capital Addis Ababa.

"It is not footwear we are producing - it's a kind of art," explained Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu, who founded soleRebels in 2005 in the neighbourhood where she grew up, after realising skilled residents lacked job opportunities.

"For people to be innovative... they don't have to really travel a long way or copy somebody's business idea. It's right there," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The entrepreneur in her mid-30s is no fan of foreign aid, which she says has not helped her community. She prefers to see people improve their own situation through dignified work with decent pay.

At soleRebels, which employs around 420 people, workers on average earn four to five times the Ethiopian minimum wage, according to the brand's website. It is the only footwear company to be certified by the World Fair Trade Organization, the site notes.

"What I want to see happen is that, in my company, people who are coming to work are able to go to school, are able to support their family, are able to live the life they wanted," Alemu said in a phone interview from Copenhagen, where she was speaking at the Global Green Growth Forum this week.

Her aim has been to turn Ethiopian tradition into an international green brand - a challenge she has risen to with energy and enthusiasm, setting up an online shop and soleRebels stores from Taiwan to Silicon Valley and Greece.

This fiscal year, the company expects revenue of \$10 million to \$12 million. It says it is on track to become the first global retail chain from a developing nation to open 100 stores; and achieve over \$200 million in revenues by 2019.

Yet despite her ambition, Alemu - who has won several international business awards and is a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader - isn't focused primarily on profits.

In her eyes, the value of her business lies in bringing Ethiopian craftsmanship to the international market in a way that preserves culture, benefits local people and protects the environment.

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