



PAGE 3: B. ABOUT YOU

Q1: Respondent details

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Q2: Country or Customs territory

UNITED KINGDOM

Q3: Organization

NGO

PAGE 4: C. ABOUT YOUR CASE STORY

Q4: Title of case story

SPINNA Circle - changing lives through the adoption of e-commerce and mobile technology as a platform for global connectivity and market access for women entrepreneurs and small businesses in fashion and textiles.

Q5: Case story focus

E-commerce development and efforts to bridge the "digital divide".

Q6: Case story abstract

From its inception in 2009, SPINNA has been an organisation which set out with a belief in new technologies as part of its core mode of working to bridge the digital divide to empower women in fashion and textiles. Several valuable lessons have been learnt along the way. SPINNA Circle now is a platform that has adapted and evolved since its early days by listening to the needs of members and learning from complex experiences in the field. From an organisation which focused on using the internet to create an online network to connect women entrepreneurs with one another, SPINNA is now moving towards new directions of offering a unique tailor-made e-commerce platform selling exclusive products sourced from SPINNA members and unique small businesses globally while working within the complex web of logistical challenges faced by producers and creators in different environments to bring those products to the market.

Q7: Who provided funding?

Bilateral donor, NGO, Private sector,
Other (please specify)
Several organisations incl (USAID, Clothing Connect BV, NatWest, Middlesex University, membership fee)

Q8: Project/Programme type

Multi-country

Q9: Your text case story

What is SPINNA Circle?

“SPINNA is a way of doing business that is inherently responsible, transparent and inclusive by removing borders while opening channels for creative collaboration, innovation, training and development to empower women and girls globally”.

SPINNA Circle Ltd. is a dynamic not-for-profit online and offline platform created for and by stakeholders from all areas of the fashion and textiles industry globally.

The core objectives are: igniting inspiration, empowering entrepreneurship and furthering fashion!

Concept: Bringing traditional skills into mainstream business while empowering women in fashion and textiles globally

Like many great ideas SPINNA was forged over a passionate conversation and coffee in a café in Paris, November 2009. SPINNA began life as a project run by Clothing Connect to engage with more women textile workers and company owners globally to encourage managerial and entrepreneurial development. In April 2010 Rupa Ganguli launched SPINNA as a unique foundation that has since run several programmes that further its vision of economic empowerment of women through trade and developing their businesses in the textiles and fashion sectors. This became SPINNA Circle.

SPINNA Circle is made up of a network of textile groups called ‘circles’ locally and globally. These work on a ‘hub and spoke’ approach and are connected through an online dedicated networking platform. SPINNA Circle supports the growth of women entrepreneurs and artisans across the fashion and textiles industry by linking them and providing training, mentoring and business opportunities.

For women designers, artisans and entrepreneurs, this is a dynamic and interactive organisation offering training, mentoring, and business opportunities online and offline.

For buyers, the organisation presents a source of new talent, skills and buying opportunities to expand retailers’ offerings and bring new exciting textiles and fashion to the customer.

For business professionals and experts, it is a forum to work as mentors and provide business inputs to women in this sector.

For supporters and partners, this is an opportunity to engage with development activities globally and locally and be able to have a tangible and sustainable impact through an established forum with a focused development mandate

Amongst its many projects and programmes, SPINNA Circle has partnered with the US State Department to showcase women in fashion in Kyrgyzstan, worked with the United Nations Agency – The International Trade Centre (ITC) to connect Peruvian women entrepreneurs and skilled artisans to US high end fashion markets, partnered with NatWest Bank in the UK to mentor and train women entrepreneurs across various boroughs of London, partnered with the Middlesex University to offer peer to peer training and skills development to Central Asian women together with UK students and designer makers and worked with USAID to support the development of women artisans and entrepreneurs across Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan by offering skills development, training and market access. SPINNA Circle looks forward to developing and implementing many more projects with development partners and buyers to link women to markets.

The organisation set up in 2009 (from which SPINNA Circle has evolved) was designed with the foresight of using technology and digital solutions for creating a borderless world where women were able to connect and work with each other, as well as sell across global markets from the comfort of their homes and communities. Several valuable lessons have been learnt along the way. SPINNA Circle now is a platform that has adapted and evolved since its early days by listening to the needs of members and learning from complex experiences in the field. From an organisation which focused on using the internet to create an online network to connect women entrepreneurs with one another, SPINNA is now moving towards new directions of offering a unique tailor-made e-commerce platform selling exclusive products sourced from SPINNA members and unique small businesses globally while working within the complex web of logistical challenges faced by producers and creators in different environments to bring those products to the market.

The Tajik Shirt from Khujand to London project provides the perfect example to illustrate the way in which SPINNA Circle is changing the way business is done in the fashion and textiles industry globally.

What happens when an exquisite age old Tajik embroidery skill; the industrial demands of the fashion industry; a global platform empowering women; a development agency and a UK University all come together and work towards one goal?

Extraordinary things can happen....and did!

For the first time, women in Khujand, north Tajikistan were able to use their skills and creativity, guided by the SPINNA team to work on contemporary shirts for an international high fashion market.

The Brief

The historic Silk Road represents a network of interconnected trade routes crossing the entire Asian land mass between China and the Mediterranean, with some of the key historic trading hubs at Samarkand, Bukhara, Merv, Balkh, Khiva, Dushanbe - cities all within modern Central Asia and Afghanistan, but now disconnected from each other by centuries of political and social fragmentation.

As the US Department of State's WES network had identified, there are, in Central Asia, "...Several highly qualified women entrepreneurs in textile and apparel industry; however, there is a lack of knowledge on how to access international markets, inputs on how to design and develop products that are market driven, expertise on sourcing from other countries, and knowledge on market research and analysis. In addition, entrepreneurs face several barriers to producing products on a consistent basis that meet buyers' expectations in terms of quality and quantity." This was SPINNA Circle's brief to develop and implement a unique and tangible market driven outcome in a record time of 12 months.

The Project Implementation

The overall objective of this project "Strengthening networks in Central Asia and developing markets for women entrepreneurs in textiles through SPINNA Circle" was to increase the competitiveness and visibility of women in textiles and clothing via online and offline networks from Central Asia, primarily Uzbekistan and Tajikistan through sustainable business practices.

It also aimed to build upon existing online and offline regional networks created in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2014 by SPINNA, facilitate design collaborations between the countries and promote regional textile skills so as to enable the growth of sustainable trade regionally and internationally for women artisans. The project focused on profiling and connecting women with each other through the already established SPINNA online and regional networks while supporting the development of their skills geared to the development of market oriented and demanded products which could potentially sell online and via offline channels.

During the needs assessment conducted in June 2015, SPINNA Circle team identified potential member companies in Tajikistan and identified experienced individual business persons of the Women's Development Association (WDA) in Khujand, Tajikistan to help strengthen networks of collaborative and mutually supportive women entrepreneurs in fashion and textiles in Central Asia. The collaboration with the Women's Development Association (WDA) in Khujand worked extremely well. The Founder of this organisation, Ms. Dilobar Sanginova, has consistently been a solid supporter of the project and of SPINNA Circle's work in Central Asia and internationally. Through strong support of this project she has encouraged the trust of all the local participants in Khujand. Ms Emma Dick, Director of Projects and Training for SPINNA Circle visited Khujand several times for the project and this developed consistency, continuity and trust in the relationship between local participants and SPINNA Circle.

The activity focused on training included two sets of workshops in the field. The first set focused on introducing the skills and techniques while the second set was more advanced and focused on technical concepts of quality and pattern drafting leading to collaborations and design developments from a market perspective. Since the goal was to ensure that the participants could immediately start working commercially, the activity was very practical and hands-on and was based in a workshop with machines and technical materials. It also consisted also of getting the right type of raw materials including sourcing of good quality threads.

SPINNA Circle's team focused on designing and developing training activities and programmes for the identified groups of women entrepreneurs by anticipating ways in which they could continue to connect with international markets even after the funded project ended in June 2016. This is key to SPINNA's ethos to bridge the gap between funded development projects and the market, by connecting beneficiaries from projects to a supportive community of artisans, designers and businesses globally, and for this peer-support network to act as a continual source of mentoring, collaboration, advice and connectivity.

The advanced training included:

Day 1: Advanced Pattern Drafting Skills

Day 2: Product Development and Design

Day 3: Completion of Project Work and Small group tutorials

While the project team focused on skills development in the field, the online team focused on developing guidelines and setting up profiles online in the SPINNA gallery and on the SPINNA online members networking platform. Through this network, it was even more possible to showcase the work and designs and skills of the local artisans globally to women in the hubs and networks in other parts of the world. The online SPINNA gallery along with the presence and key messaging via SPINNA Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter helped bring the stories, skills and products of these women in Khujand to the rest of the world. For the first time, these stories and skills were visible in an authentic manner in its raw yet professional form to the global community. While maintaining and respecting privacy of the SPINNA members, a new-found visibility was achieved for the beautiful embroidery skills and possibilities were explored for further commercially viable market opportunities. The concept of an e-commerce platform, which had already started taking shape within the overall SPINNA Circle strategy, suddenly seemed much more of an achievable reality. The e-commerce platform, 'Wear-A-Story'™ would soon become a reality and offer global consumers with access to exclusively sourced and curated stories and offer a window into the textiles skills from around the world.

The Impact:

The skilled women artisans and entrepreneurs were very excited about the prospect of taking their skills to the next level and creating internationally marketable design products. The SPINNA team decided to bring together all the resources within the network to produce a first flagship shirt collection of pieces with value added inputs provided and developed using the creative talent and natural embroidery skills of the women in Khujand. These pieces not only demonstrate one realisable channel for women's empowerment consistently and sustainably but also provide a realistic solution in a commercially viable manner for trade to be genuinely inclusive going forward. To make this first flagship collection

(made completely through SPINNA membership), SPINNA Circle used its online and offline networks to connect with its partners and members to create this truly unique shirt collection. The Tajik shirt collection was made by using the following sources:

- Fabric Source: organic cotton fabric ethically sourced from mills in India bought from Charlie Ross, Director and Owner of Offset Warehouse (SPINNA Member London)
- Pattern making: Patterns were made by Kiran Gobin, Lecturer Fashion Design, Middlesex University (SPINNA Institutional partner),
- UK Pattern cutting and stitching: The fabric was cut and the pieces were all stitched by Shilpa Bilimoria, House of Bilimoria (SPINNA member London)
- Embroidery added value: In collaboration with Dilobar Sanginova of Women's Development Association (WDA) (SPINNA Institutional partner Tajikistan) 24 women came together to participate in this cross border project to provide a unique touch with embroidery, applique and stitching skills
- Photography: Lisa Bretherick (SPINNA partner, London)
- "Khujand to London" shirt samples were presented for the first time during the WTO Public Forum in Geneva as an exclusive preview from 27 – 29 September 2016

These shirts would be exhibited in London in 2017 at an exclusive gallery and become the basis for several more product lines and collections made through such connections sold on the newly developed ecommerce portal Wear A Story™ featuring 'stories' from around the world while offering unique collections to the global market. WDA and SPINNA Circle agreed on a partnership and collaborative agreement leading the way for more market access for several more women in the region. Not only did this benefit the women but impacted the communities they lived and worked within.

This project included several other outcomes and related activities aimed at developing sustainable relations and building concrete partnerships. Some of these included connecting SPINNA partner, Middlesex University in London with SPINNA partner, Kazakh University of Business and Technology in Astana. This led onto the first collaboration between these universities where staff discussed exchange between the universities and educational funds were committed and agreed.

It also focused on bringing together two artisan designers, one woman from Uzbekistan and one from Kazakhstan together to work and collaborate on a joint collection for the first time. This project focused on creating and turning this into a tangible relation, which became a commercially fruitful collection for both women entrepreneurs. This was the first time a Kazakh designer and Uzbek designer had collaborated at this level. It not only represented the relation between two designers but in fact opened the door for several more collaborations and the development of more regional ties and linkages going forward. Both these women entrepreneurs had already received inputs through SPINNA Circle on standards and had been able to visit international markets earlier. Their joint collection was presented at a special high-end fashion event in Almaty in September 2016.

For more information on SPINNA Circle project and its outcomes, please contact us and we would be delighted to give you more information: info@spinna.org

Q10: Lessons learnt

From its inception in 2009, SPINNA has been an organisation which set out with a belief in new technologies as part of its core mode of working to bridge the digital divide to empower women in fashion and textiles.

Technology at the heart of SPINNA's ethos

Over the past seven years (since 2009) SPINNA has developed or commissioned technology solutions to bring women artisans and entrepreneurs closer to each other to form a network, gain professional skills, and reach closer to markets, customers and buyers – e.g. a SPINNA magazine app for smart phone; online learning platform; three iterations of a website; a self-built online members networking portal; SPINNA Gallery and Showcase pages; QR codes printed on hangtags and silk scarf designs which linked to YouTube pages showing videos of the producers.

Global partnerships with local organisations

The SPINNA methodology for working in the field has always been to partner with local trusted organisations, as this is the way to ensure greater reach and visibility when establishing credibility in new projects in new regions. A mixed methods approach was often required in regions where there is a technology gap, with local communities of women helping to spread the word about how to contact SPINNA and how to join the network. The network grew both online and in real life, through personal connections and word of mouth recommendations.

Social media has opened access to markets

As the experience of SPINNA grows, the organisation has recognised that very effective modes of growing the network of SMEs and designer-entrepreneurs and engaging with the market are the social media aspects of technology, with recognised global platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, rather than just using stand-alone technology-focused systems. Social networks tools reflect the socially-embedded nature of technology and the different business relationships SPINNA is working to pull together. Appropriation of diverse existing technologies enable the trusted network to grow and collaborate in more organic ways which mirror personal professional interactions.

Mobile technology is the way forward

Furthermore, when working in diverse environments SPINNA has recognised that solutions which operate on mobile phone technology rather than a computer screen are often preferred to communicating via web-based platforms. Viber, WhatsApp, WeChat and other phone-based systems, dependent on cultural and geographic preferences, have proved the lifeline of the implementation of projects on the ground, and an easy way to connect team members dispersed all over the globe. Even problems of translation are greatly aided by apps such as Google Translate and Speak & Translate.

Digital solutions help leapfrog traditional and conventional methods

Where there is a will to achieve the same objective, members will pull together using whatever technology at their disposal to understand each other and achieve the agreed goals of a project activity to bridge the digital divide.
