

Beyond Ethical Fashion: Can Milanese Designers Foster True Economic Independence for Sierra Leonean Artisans?

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ABSTRACT:

This study critically examines SIERRA2go, a Milan-based, designer-led non-profit initiative that collaborates with female artisans in Sierra Leone. Positioned within the discourse of sustainable fashion and economic empowerment, SIERRA2go presents itself as an alternative to profit-driven fair-trade models by relying on external funding and training programs rather than direct market sales. While the initiative aspires to foster long-term independence for artisans, key questions remain: Does it truly empower them, or does it subtly reinforce dependence on Western markets?

Drawing on perspectives from cultural capital theory, postcolonial fashion studies, and economic ethics in sustainable fashion, this study explores SIERRA2go's impact on market access, production control, and financial sustainability. The findings suggest that while SIERRA2go offers a refreshing alternative to traditional fair trade, its reliance on donor funding may ultimately limit artisans' economic autonomy rather than strengthen it. This paper argues that for true empowerment to occur, locally driven business models and direct market access strategies must be prioritized—otherwise, well-intended interventions risk perpetuating the very dependency they seek to dismantle.

Keywords: Sustainable Fashion, Economic Empowerment, Milanese Design, Artisanal Training, Non-Profit Model, Postcolonial Fashion

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving discourse on sustainable fashion, collaborations between Western designers and Global South artisans are often celebrated as ethical solutions—offering economic opportunities, skill development, and market access while providing consumers with a "responsible" alternative to fast fashion. These initiatives, typically structured around fair trade principles and non-profit partnerships, claim to empower artisans by integrating their craftsmanship into global fashion supply chains. But do they? Despite their ethical positioning, many such collaborations fail to disrupt the deeper power structures of the industry. Instead of fostering true economic autonomy, artisans often remain trapped in a cycle of market dependency, with little control over branding, pricing, or long-term business strategy (Fletcher, 2008; Hoskins, 2014). This paradox is especially evident in non-profit sustainable fashion initiatives, which—unlike commercial fair trade brands—focus on skill-building and economic sustainability rather than direct market integration. SIERRA2go, a Milan-based, designer-led, non-profit collaboration with female artisans in Sierra Leone, embodies this model. Instead of relying on product sales,

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SIERRA2go depends on external funding and training programs, aiming to equip artisans with technical expertise, financial literacy, and market awareness.

While this approach aspires to create a pathway to long-term empowerment, a key question emerges: Does it truly foster independence, or does it simply restructure artisans' reliance on Western markets under a different framework? The extent to which Milanese designers retain creative and economic control over the project complicates this issue—if artisans lack agency over branding, pricing, and decision-making, can they ever transition from participants to independent business owners?

Moreover, SIERRA2go's dependence on external funding rather than market-driven sustainability raises another concern: Is this truly an alternative to profit-driven fair trade, or does its reliance on donations ultimately limit its long-term viability? These concerns tap into a larger debate within sustainable fashion: Is "ethical fashion" merely a moralized extension of existing global hierarchies, or can it be redesigned to create true economic sovereignty for artisans?

Moving beyond simplistic evaluations of fair trade and ethical production, this study takes a critical look at SIERRA2go through the lenses of cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1984), postcolonial fashion studies (Niessen, 2021), and economic ethics in sustainable fashion (Fletcher, 2008). By analyzing its production structure, training programs, and market access strategies, this research asks: Can SIERRA2go truly transition artisans from market participants to independent entrepreneurs? Ultimately, by situating SIERRA2go within broader debates on non-profit sustainability, labor agency, and postcolonial power relations, this paper seeks to contribute to the growing discourse on how sustainable fashion initiatives can move beyond ethical branding toward structural change.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section lays the theoretical groundwork for analyzing SIERRA2go within the larger debate on sustainable fashion collaborations. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, postcolonial fashion studies, and economic ethics in sustainable fashion, this paper explores the power dynamics, economic dependencies, and long-term empowerment potential of non-profit fashion initiatives. A key question underpins this discussion: Can Milanese designers truly empower artisans in Sierra Leone, or do these collaborations—despite their ethical aspirations—ultimately reinforce global fashion inequalities? These theoretical frameworks provide the critical lens needed to unpack the tensions between Western-led sustainability efforts and local economic sovereignty, revealing whether SIERRA2go represents a step toward true empowerment or simply a rebranded form of dependency.

2.1 Cultural Capital and Design Power

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1984) offers a lens to examine the power hierarchies at play in global fashion collaborations. Cultural capital—the social and symbolic value attached to knowledge, aesthetics, and technical skills—ultimately determines who holds creative and economic authority in the industry.

In Milanese-African collaborations, power remains unevenly distributed. Milanese designers, with their access to global fashion networks and established industry standards,

retain significant cultural capital, shaping branding, aesthetics, and market positioning. Meanwhile, Sierra Leonean artisans—despite their rich craft traditions—are often positioned as producers rather than co-creators, limiting their ability to influence design narratives and gain direct market visibility.

SIERRA2go presents itself as a model for artisan empowerment, but a key question remains: Are artisans truly co-creators, or are Milanese designers still making the critical decisions? If branding, pricing, and design authority remain centralized in Milan, can this initiative genuinely shift the balance of power, or does it merely reframe existing hierarchies under an ethical label?

2.2 Postcolonial Fashion and the Ethics of Collaboration

Postcolonial fashion studies argue that many so-called "sustainable" fashion collaborations continue to uphold colonial-era power structures, often restricting artisans' market access and creative agency rather than dismantling systemic inequalities (Niessen, 2009). SIERRA2go, despite its non-profit mission, is no exception. While it aims to empower artisans, key branding and pricing decisions remain firmly controlled in Milan, making it difficult for artisans to transition into independent business owners (Hoskins, 2014).

This raises an important question: Do such models genuinely foster economic autonomy, or do they simply repackage dependency under an ethical facade? SIERRA2go attempts to address this issue by prioritizing skill-building over direct wage labor. However, two fundamental challenges remain:

2.2.1 Design Authorship and Creative Control

Even within non-profit initiatives like SIERRA2go, a critical question remains: Are artisans genuinely involved in design decisions, or are they simply executing pre-set ideas? While the project aspires to integrate traditional craftsmanship into global fashion, the key issue is how much creative agency artisans have. Do they actively shape the aesthetics and narratives of their work, or are they confined to the role of skilled laborers, producing designs already dictated by Milanese creatives?

Research suggests that in many designer-artisan collaborations, artisans are often executors rather than co-creators, with their involvement largely limited to production rather than concept development (Wang, Ji, & He, 2023). If core design elements—such as motifs, techniques, and overall aesthetics—continue to be dictated by external designers, then SIERRA2go risks reinforcing existing power hierarchies, where Western designers define what is considered "fashionable" for global markets rather than fostering a genuine creative exchange (Hammond, 2020).

2.2.2 Beyond Market Dependency

SIERRA2go presents itself as a model for economic empowerment, but a crucial question remains: Does its training program truly equip artisans to build independent brands and access markets directly? While skill development is undeniably a vital step toward self-sufficiency, true economic independence requires far more than just technical expertise—it hinges on access to distribution networks, branding knowledge, and financial autonomy.

Research suggests that without these elements, artisans remain trapped in market constraints, often relying on middlemen or external partnerships for visibility and sales (Jain, 2018). If SIERRA2go does not actively facilitate pathways for artisans to establish direct market connections, they may still find themselves dependent on Milanese partnerships for exposure and income. This risks perpetuating, rather than dismantling, the existing cycle of economic reliance—keeping artisans within an externally controlled system rather than fostering a locally driven, self-sustaining fashion ecosystem (Wang, Ji, & He, 2023).

2.3 Economic Ethics in Sustainable Fashion

Economic ethics in sustainable fashion revolve around a fundamental question: Do artisanal collaborations foster true financial independence, or do they merely repackage economic vulnerability under an ethical guise? (Fletcher, 2008). Traditionally, sustainable fashion has operated within fair trade models, where artisans receive compensation for their labor but remain economically dependent on brands and middlemen—a structure that provides stability but not autonomy.

SIERRA2go, by contrast, seeks to break away from this purely transactional system by prioritizing skill development over direct wage labor. Yet, while this approach signals a shift in intent, it introduces three critical challenges that call its long-term effectiveness into question:

2.3.1 Financial Sustainability and Long-Term Economic Autonomy

While SIERRA2go sets itself apart from traditional fair trade brands by operating as a non-profit initiative, this model introduces significant financial challenges. Without a profit-driven structure, how can the program secure long-term funding to sustain its training initiatives and economic interventions? Research suggests that many artisan-focused non-profits remain financially dependent on Western donors, raising concerns about whether such models truly promote self-sufficiency or merely reframe economic dependency under a different guise (Akkas, 2018). Unlike commercial brands that generate revenue through product sales, SIERRA2go relies on external support, making its long-term viability uncertain. If continuous funding is required for survival, can this model genuinely be considered a sustainable alternative, or is it simply another iteration of donor-driven dependency?

On the other hand, financial sustainability alone does not equate to economic independence. While SIERRA2go's training programs enhance artisans' technical skills, research suggests that true empowerment demands more—specifically, financial autonomy and direct market access (Jean-Francois, 2015). Without these critical elements, artisans remain reliant on external intermediaries rather than developing self-sustaining enterprises. SIERRA2go prioritizes skill development, yet few artisans transition into independent business owners. Studies on similar collaborations indicate that without control over branding and direct sales, artisans struggle to move beyond dependency, instead remaining reliant on Western intermediaries for visibility and market access (Jain, 2018).

This raises a key question: Does SIERRA2go provide a clear pathway for artisans to transition from trainees to independent entrepreneurs, or does it ultimately leave them in the same cycle of dependency—just under a different name?

2.3.2 Challenges in Labor Supervision

Beyond economic concerns, labor oversight presents another significant challenge for SIERRA2go. Ensuring fair wages and ethical working conditions is particularly difficult when operations are managed remotely from Milan, limiting direct oversight. Research suggests that Western-led ethical certification systems often fail to account for worker agency, instead maintaining a top-down structure where external actors dictate what constitutes "fair labor" (Sultana, 2021). This raises a critical question: How can SIERRA2go implement a reliable oversight mechanism without reinforcing paternalistic Western control?

While external audits and ethical certifications are common in sustainable fashion, studies indicate that these approaches often fail to accommodate local labor norms and self-regulation, inadvertently reinforcing existing power asymmetries (Hann & Wang, 2016). If SIERRA2go is to establish a truly ethical and independent working environment, it must explore alternative models of labor supervision, such as community-led monitoring systems or artisan cooperatives that enable self-governance rather than external oversight. Research on labor collaborations suggests that empowering artisans to oversee their own working conditions—rather than relying on external audits—can help shift decision-making power toward local stakeholders (Benstead, Hendry, & Stevenson, 2018). Without such mechanisms, SIERRA2go risks perpetuating the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge, where oversight remains an external function rather than an internally driven process led by the artisans themselves.

Rabine (2002) argues that for global fashion collaborations to be truly transformative, they must prioritize economic structures that enable artisans to operate independently, rather than integrating them into existing Western-centric supply chains. SIERRA2go offers a potential alternative, but its long-term success will depend on whether it can transition from an externally funded program to a self-sustaining economic network—one where artisans control their own labor standards and financial futures rather than remaining reliant on external governance.

2.4 The Need for a Structural Shift

SIERRA2go's dependence on donor funding highlights deeper structural constraints within sustainable fashion. Despite its goal of fostering economic independence, artisans remain tethered to Milanese-led partnerships, limiting their ability to establish self-sustaining businesses (Hoskins, 2014). SIERRA2go positions itself as an alternative to profit-driven fair trade brands, yet its decision-making power remains centralized in Milan. Artisans have minimal influence over branding, pricing, and production strategy, restricting their ability to operate as independent market actors (Osinski, 2022). Without mechanisms to transfer ownership or financial control to artisans, SIERRA2go risks reinforcing existing market hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Beyond governance, a fundamental financial question remains: Can SIERRA2go sustain itself without continuous donor support, ensuring long-term viability rather than

serving as a temporary intervention. Research indicates that many sustainable fashion collaborations lack a clear transition strategy for achieving financial independence, leaving them vulnerable to economic instability (Talay, Oxborrow, & Brindley, 2020).

Additionally, the issue of labor oversight raises another challenge: How can SIERRA2go guarantee fair working conditions without reinforcing Western paternalistic control. Standardized ethical certification models often fail to accommodate local labor norms, instead imposing externally driven definitions of fairness. If SIERRA2go does not develop locally governed oversight mechanisms, it risks replicating the very power structures it seeks to challenge.

Ultimately, the success of SIERRA2go—and similar non-profit initiatives—hinges not just on good intentions, but on their ability to disrupt entrenched power dynamics and foster genuine economic autonomy (Skritsovali, Randles, & Hannibal, 2023).

3. Case Study: The SIERRA2go Model

This section critically examines the SIERRA2go initiative, focusing on its production model, training programs, and labor oversight mechanisms. Unlike conventional fair trade collaborations, SIERRA2go operates as a non-profit, designer-led project, aiming to integrate artisanal labor from Sierra Leone into Milan's independent fashion sector. By analyzing its economic structure, market integration, and ethical challenges, this case study evaluates whether SIERRA2go genuinely empowers artisans or perpetuates economic and creative dependency.

3.1 Production Model: Non-Profit vs. Traditional Fashion Supply Chains

SIERRA2go collaborates with artisans not through conventional wage-based labor contracts but through a hybrid system of skill-sharing and stipend-based work. Artisans receive compensation for their contributions, but the primary goal is long-term economic empowerment rather than immediate financial gain. However, this raises an important question: Does this structure truly provide artisans with a stable income, or does it make them reliant on donor funding rather than sustainable market-driven work? Unlike traditional fair trade models where artisans are paid per piece, SIERRA2go's funding model depends on grants, donations, and partnerships with independent designers, creating uncertainty in long-term financial stability.

3.1.2 Market Access and Pricing Control

Another key issue is SIERRA2go's connection to the Milanese fashion market. While it provides artisans with a platform to showcase their work, who ultimately controls pricing and product placement? If Milanese designers dictate price points and determine which designs enter the market, artisans may remain economically marginalized, lacking direct access to buyers. Research suggests that control over pricing and branding is a critical factor in determining whether artisans achieve economic independence or remain dependent on external actors (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2017).

For SIERRA2go to successfully transition from external funding to sustainable market participation, it must establish clear pathways for artisans to set their own pricing, manage direct sales, and build independent branding strategies. Without these mechanisms,

artisans may continue to function as producers within a Western-controlled supply chain rather than as autonomous market participants.

3.2 Skills Training: Empowerment or Continued Dependency?

A key component of SIERRA2go's model is its vocational training programs, aimed at providing women and children with long-term employment opportunities. This is a significant departure from many sustainable fashion initiatives that focus solely on short-term income generation rather than capacity building.

3.2.1 Structure of the Training Programs

The foundation of SIERRA2go's model lies in its comprehensive training initiative, which seeks to equip artisans with both technical expertise and entrepreneurial skills. Unlike conventional wage labor programs, SIERRA2go adopts a multi-tiered approach that integrates skill-building, financial literacy, and market access, aiming not just to enhance artisans' craftsmanship but to establish sustainable employment pathways (Baldacchino & Cutajar, 2011).



Figure 1. The image captures a collaborative moment between SIERRA2go volunteers and local artisans in Sierra Leone, illustrating the practical exchange of skills and knowledge. Such interactions not only foster cultural understanding but also empower local artisans by enhancing

The first component focuses on basic textile and tailoring skills, where women are trained in garment construction, fabric manipulation, and embroidery techniques. Research indicates that urban artisanal networks play a significant role in fostering economic independence, but these efforts must be supported by market integration strategies (Shih & Agrafiotis, 2020). As they advance, the program introduces more specialized artisanal techniques, including traditional weaving, dyeing, and embellishment, ensuring that local craftsmanship is not only preserved but also adapted to meet contemporary fashion demands.

However, technical mastery alone does not guarantee economic independence. Recognizing this, SIERRA2go integrates entrepreneurship and financial literacy training, helping artisans develop the competencies needed to manage production, set pricing structures, and navigate both local and international markets. Studies suggest that entrepreneurial training and local networks play a key role in artisans' ability to transition from laborers to independent business owners (Rodrigues, Marques, & Ramadani, 2023).

In addition to adult training, SIERRA2go extends its impact through youth and community outreach programs, introducing children and young adults to craft-based professions at an early stage. Research highlights that mentorship and structured training programs are key to ensuring that artisans move beyond training into financial sustainability and self-sufficiency (Ebekozen *et al.*, 2024).



Figure2. The woman in this photograph represents the many artisans participating in SIERRA2go's initiative. While her individual role may not be highlighted in this moment, her presence symbolizes the importance of local craftsmanship and the potential for economic opportunities within such collaborative projects.

While these initiatives align with global sustainable fashion goals, a fundamental question remains: Does SIERRA2go's training program genuinely foster economic self-sufficiency, or does it inadvertently integrate artisans into a system where they remain dependent on Milanese designers for visibility and income? If artisans lack direct access to markets and distribution channels, their training—no matter how extensive—may serve only to strengthen their position as skilled laborers within a supply chain still controlled by external actors, rather than as independent fashion entrepreneurs.

3.2.2 Western Standards vs. Local Cultural Norms

A key challenge in labor supervision within sustainable fashion initiatives is the imposition of Western-defined ethical standards, which often fail to account for local economic realities and culturally embedded labor structures. The concept of “ethical labor” is not universally defined, yet many sustainability frameworks rely on European fair trade principles, assuming that they can be universally applied (Novitz & Mangan, 2012). This raises concerns about the extent to which such standards genuinely benefit artisans or simply reinforce external control over their working conditions.

For instance, work schedules and wage structures in Sierra Leone may not align with European fair trade regulations, which often emphasize fixed hourly wages and standardized work shifts. However, studies indicate that many artisans operate within flexible, communal labor systems, where income is shared among family members or negotiated based on seasonal demand (Boudreau, 2019). These models reflect local economic and social structures, yet they often conflict with Western auditing practices,

which prioritize individual contracts and formalized wage agreements. The imposition of rigid external standards can, therefore, create tensions between ethical oversight and local autonomy, potentially disrupting established community labor practices rather than improving them.

To navigate this complexity, SIERRA2go must move beyond a top-down regulatory approach and instead explore collaborative models of labor supervision. Research suggests that private labor regulations often reinforce power asymmetries rather than fostering worker empowerment, making it critical to develop community-led monitoring systems (Bartley, 2018). Such systems enable artisans themselves to participate in defining and enforcing fair labor conditions, ensuring that ethical oversight does not become a tool of external control but a framework for locally driven governance. By recognizing and integrating alternative models of labor organization, SIERRA2go has the potential to develop an ethical fashion supply chain that respects both global sustainability goals and the cultural autonomy of the artisans it seeks to empower.

3.2.3 Can Cooperatives Reduce Supervision Pressures?

A viable alternative to externally imposed labor oversight is the development of artisan-led cooperative models, where workers themselves take ownership of wage structures, production cycles, and ethical standards. Studies show that artisanal cooperatives balance producer identity, governance, and economic sustainability, making them a viable alternative to corporate oversight (Adderley & Gray, 2020). Rather than relying on Western auditing mechanisms, which often impose rigid compliance frameworks, cooperatives offer a decentralized approach to labor governance, ensuring that artisans retain control over their own working conditions while still adhering to broader sustainability principles (Witherell, 2012).

By shifting from top-down regulation to self-governance, cooperatives could significantly reduce dependency on external audits, replacing them with community-driven oversight mechanisms that are more attuned to local labor customs and economic needs. Research on cooperative labor structures suggests that they enhance worker autonomy and economic independence, reducing reliance on foreign intermediaries (Orbaiceta, 2013). In addition to fostering greater autonomy, this model would enhance economic resilience, as cooperatives collectively access funding, negotiate contracts, and build independent market networks, reducing their reliance on Milanese partners for financial stability (Dobrusin, 2013).

Beyond financial and regulatory benefits, cooperatives also serve as a mechanism for leadership development, enabling artisans to take on decision-making roles traditionally held by external stakeholders. Instead of functioning as passive producers within a designer-led supply chain, artisans would gain a stronger voice in shaping business strategies, product pricing, and brand identity. Studies show that cooperatives enhance both financial stability and community-driven governance, ensuring that artisans have direct control over economic decisions (Udensi et al., 2014).

However, the success of this model depends on whether SIERRA2go can facilitate a structural shift from donor-driven initiatives to artisan-led governance, ensuring that cooperatives are not merely symbolic but serve as genuine platforms for long-term economic and creative empowerment. Without a shift toward locally driven oversight

structures, labor regulation will likely remain in the hands of external auditors, rather than those directly engaged in production. This continued reliance on top-down monitoring mechanisms risks reinforcing hierarchical power dynamics, ultimately contradicting the very objective of empowering artisans as autonomous economic agents. For sustainable fashion collaborations to foster genuine independence, labor governance must be transitioned from external compliance models to community-led regulatory frameworks, ensuring that oversight is embedded within local economic and cultural contexts rather than dictated by distant stakeholders.

3.3 SIERRA2go's Structural Challenges

While SIERRA2go offers a compelling alternative to conventional profit-driven sustainable fashion models, its long-term viability depends on addressing three fundamental structural challenges. First, can it successfully transition from donor-dependent funding to a self-sustaining economic model, ensuring financial stability beyond external sponsorship? Research suggests that many non-profit organizations struggle with financial sustainability, particularly in diversifying income streams and reducing reliance on donors (Jean-Francois, 2015).

Second, do its training programs genuinely equip artisans for long-term economic independence, or do they inadvertently reinforce dependence on external markets and Milanese designers? Finally, how can SIERRA2go implement fair labor standards without imposing external regulatory frameworks that risk undermining local agency?

The resolution of these challenges will ultimately determine whether SIERRA2go can evolve into a truly sustainable, locally led fashion ecosystem, or if it remains a well-intentioned yet structurally constrained initiative, limited by its reliance on external funding and oversight. Achieving genuine artisan empowerment requires not only economic self-sufficiency but also a fundamental shift in decision-making power, ensuring that artisans are not merely participants in global supply chains but active architects of their own economic and creative futures.

4. SIERRA2go's Limitations and Future Pathways

While SIERRA2go presents itself as a progressive alternative to traditional sustainable fashion models, its long-term success depends on addressing key structural limitations. This section critically examines whether SIERRA2go's approach truly empowers artisans, assesses the sustainability of its non-profit model, and explores potential strategies for reducing market dependency and enhancing local leadership.

4.1 Can SIERRA2go Truly Empower Artisans?

One of the fundamental goals of SIERRA2go is to move beyond traditional wage labor models and foster genuine artisan empowerment. However, empowerment is not solely measured by economic inclusion—it also depends on decision-making power, creative authorship, and control over brand identity. Research highlights that in many designer-led collaborations, artisans struggle to influence branding and market positioning, remaining passive participants rather than equal stakeholders (Shih & Agrafiotis, 2020). A key question is whether artisans actively shape the SIERRA2go brand, or if they remain passive producers within a designer-led initiative.

Although the project provides skills training and income opportunities, the degree of creative autonomy artisans hold remains unclear. Studies suggest that artisanal entrepreneurs often face barriers in decision-making, as branding and pricing structures tend to remain in the hands of designers (Ott & Cukier, 2021). If Milanese designers dictate pricing and market strategy, then artisans continue to function within a Western-controlled supply chain, rather than as independent fashion entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, the balance between financial compensation and labor rights is a crucial factor—do artisans have control over their wages and production conditions, or are these still determined externally? Research indicates that power asymmetries in designer-artisan collaborations often limit artisans' ability to negotiate their earnings or influence production cycles, reinforcing traditional labor structures rather than empowerment-driven business models (Hu, Hur, & Thomas, 2023).

For SIERRA2go to fulfill its mission of artisan empowerment, it must rethink its governance structure to ensure that artisans play an active role in brand strategy, pricing models, and product development. This requires a transition from a designer-led initiative to a co-managed or artisan-led business structure, where decision-making authority is more evenly distributed.

4.2 The Sustainability of a Non-Profit Model

A major challenge SIERRA2go faces is its financial sustainability. Unlike fair trade brands that operate within a commercial revenue model, SIERRA2go depends on donor funding, grants, and philanthropic partnerships. While this allows the project to prioritize skill-building and long-term development over immediate market returns, it also raises serious concerns about long-term viability. Research on sustainable business models in the fashion industry suggests that organizations with innovative revenue structures are more likely to maintain financial stability while fulfilling social impact goals (Pedersen, Gwozd, & Hvass, 2018).

Without a self-sustaining financial model, can SIERRA2go continue to support artisans once external funding diminishes? If donor reliance persists, the project risks becoming an unsustainable intervention rather than a lasting economic ecosystem. A critical question is whether SIERRA2go can transition from a grant-funded initiative to an independent economic entity. This could involve integrating hybrid funding models, where a portion of sales revenue is reinvested into artisan training, rather than solely depending on external aid.

Additionally, local ownership models could help reduce financial instability. Studies suggest that cooperative ownership structures—where artisans own shares and participate in profit-sharing agreements—can enhance financial security and ensure long-term investment in their products. If SIERRA2go aims to create a scalable and replicable model for sustainable fashion collaborations, moving beyond a purely donor-funded structure will be crucial.

4.3 Future Pathways for Reducing Market Dependency and Strengthening Local Leadership

To ensure long-term economic resilience, SIERRA2go must explore strategies that decrease reliance on Milanese designers and Western market access while fostering greater local leadership and economic autonomy.

4.3.1 Transitioning from a Milan-Led Model to Localized Ownership

For SIERRA2go to achieve genuine artisan empowerment, it must move beyond a Milan-centered model, where its success is contingent on integration into the European fashion market. Instead, the initiative must explore ways to foster locally driven enterprises, ensuring that artisans are not merely contributors to a supply chain controlled by Milanese designers, but owners of independent brands and production networks. Studies show that artisan cooperatives play a critical role in this transition, as they provide artisans with the skills and autonomy to develop their own business strategies (Ortuño, de los Ríos, & Sastre-Merino, 2022).

A key strategy in this transition is the establishment of artisan cooperatives, where production is collectively owned and managed by the artisans themselves. Research on women-led artisan cooperatives in Sub-Saharan Africa highlights how cooperative ownership fosters both economic stability and brand independence, allowing artisans to control pricing, branding, and production cycles (Brogan & Dooley, 2023).

Such models offer more than just financial sustainability—they redistribute decision-making power, ensuring that artisans have autonomy over the business strategies that shape their livelihoods. By prioritizing cooperative ownership structures, SIERRA2go can move toward a framework that is not only economically viable but also ethically aligned with the principles of self-determination and local agency.

4.3.2 Reducing Market Dependency Through Alternative Sales Models

Currently, SIERRA2go's artisans remain highly dependent on Milanese partnerships for visibility and market access, limiting their ability to establish self-sufficient economic networks. To break this dependency, the initiative must facilitate alternative sales channels that allow artisans to directly engage with consumers, rather than operating through European intermediaries. Studies on sustainable fashion consumption suggest that direct-to-consumer (DTC) platforms can significantly enhance market access for independent artisans, reducing reliance on Western-controlled distribution channels (Han, Woodside, & Ko, 2024). One solution lies in direct-to-consumer (DTC) platforms, where artisans can leverage online marketplaces and regional networks to connect with buyers beyond Milan's fashion ecosystem. In parallel, efforts to strengthen local and regional market integration could reposition SIERRA2go's products within West African markets, fostering demand that is independent of Western consumption trends. Additionally, micro-financing initiatives could provide artisans with the capital necessary to launch their own businesses, reducing reliance on SIERRA2go's infrastructure and ensuring that economic opportunities extend beyond the lifespan of the initiative itself.

By reorienting market access toward decentralized and artisan-led distribution networks, SIERRA2go can begin to dismantle the structural inequalities that have historically positioned artisans as suppliers rather than market actors with full control over their economic futures.

4.3.3 Rethinking Labor Oversight: From External Audits to Community-Led Monitoring

Another crucial consideration is how SIERRA2go ensures fair labor conditions without imposing Western paternalistic control. Traditional external auditing systems, while designed to enforce ethical labor practices, often fail to account for local labor customs and self-regulation models, reinforcing a dynamic where oversight remains an external function rather than an internally driven mechanism. Studies suggest that voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) and community-led monitoring initiatives can strengthen labor rights enforcement without relying on top-down compliance models (Marx, Brando, & Lein, 2017).

A more sustainable alternative would be the development of community-led monitoring systems, where artisans themselves define and uphold fair labor conditions rather than adhering to externally imposed ethical standards. Research highlights that community-driven compliance mechanisms promote greater accountability and cultural relevance, ensuring that regulatory frameworks align with both international fair-trade principles and local labor practices (Khair, Lee, & Mokhtar, 2021).

A hybrid governance model could provide further balance, integrating both Western ethical standards and locally relevant labor structures to create oversight mechanisms that are collaborative rather than hierarchical. Additionally, embedding artisan leadership within compliance frameworks would ensure that ethical standards are developed by those directly engaged in production, rather than dictated by external auditors.

By shifting from externally imposed regulation to self-governance, SIERRA2go can move toward a more equitable and culturally responsive labor system, one that prioritizes artisan autonomy without compromising ethical accountability.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined SIERRA2go's approach to sustainable fashion collaboration, assessing both its successes and structural limitations. While the initiative presents a compelling alternative to profit-driven fair trade models, prioritizing skill development and long-term economic empowerment, several critical challenges remain. Chief among them is the tension between external support and local economic autonomy—can SIERRA2go transition from a donor-reliant structure to a self-sustaining artisan-led enterprise? Additionally, while its training programs provide artisans with valuable technical and entrepreneurial skills, the question of market dependency persists. Without direct market access and control over branding, pricing, and distribution, artisans may remain structurally subordinate within the global fashion economy rather than achieving true economic independence.

This study demonstrates that non-profit models like SIERRA2go, while promoting skill development, do not inherently lead to artisan independence. Without market autonomy and brand ownership, artisans remain structurally dependent on external partners, undermining the long-term sustainability of such initiatives. These findings suggest that future collaborations must prioritize direct market integration and cooperative governance models to achieve true economic sovereignty.

5.1 Contribution to Sustainable Fashion and Decolonial Discourse

At its core, this study contributes to the broader discourse on fashion, power, and decoloniality, offering a critical re-evaluation of what "empowerment" means in global fashion collaborations. While many sustainable initiatives claim to uplift artisans, their structures often reinforce existing hierarchies of creative and economic control. SIERRA2go provides an opportunity to rethink whether sustainability in fashion should be defined solely by ethical production standards, or if it must also incorporate principles of economic sovereignty and labor self-governance.

By situating SIERRA2go within the context of postcolonial fashion studies and economic ethics, this research opens up conversations about how non-Western artisans can transition from labor suppliers to independent market actors. It also raises important questions for future collaborations, particularly concerning the feasibility of local ownership models, alternative market structures, and ethical labor governance that does not rely on external oversight.

5.2 Future Research Directions

While this study critically evaluates SIERRA2go's operational model, further research is necessary to explore how non-profit sustainable fashion initiatives can transition toward artisan-led ownership structures. The long-term success of such initiatives depends not only on economic sustainability but also on power redistribution, ensuring that artisans move beyond being participants in externally managed collaborations to becoming independent market actors.

A crucial area for future inquiry is the development of locally-led fashion brands that cater to regional and domestic markets, rather than remaining tethered to Western consumer demand. Investigating how artisans can establish independent brands, leverage local aesthetics, and access funding for entrepreneurial ventures is essential in assessing whether sustainable fashion initiatives can foster self-sufficiency rather than perpetuating market dependency. Additionally, the role of digital platforms and decentralized distribution networks in enabling direct market access deserves further exploration, particularly in understanding how technology can help artisans bypass traditional intermediaries and connect with consumers on their own terms.

While sustainability managers and/ or departments are more and more common in hospitals, for service providers, separate positions or a department for sustainability are seldom: mostly sustainability is understood as an integrated part of management such as knowledge management and/ or dealt with within the existing structures. Experts mentioned that service companies increasingly provide climate managers for customers. Experts from service companies emphasized the need to establish functions of coordinators and/ or head-workman for enabling change towards sustainability. They play an important role in communicating, implementing and examining sustainability aspects. For example, in the infrastructural area (cleaning) there are strictly specified performances and if operators should act sustainable, the responsibility is therefore predominantly in management, e.g. providing dosing aids, training the operators and checking the implementation.



Figure 3. This image captures a local artisan showcasing a finished product created as part of the SIERRA2go initiative. The colorful handcrafted bag, featuring vibrant hand-dyed fabric, represents a successful collaboration between traditional Sierra Leonean craftsmanship and contemporary fashion design, aimed at promoting ethical fashion in global markets.

Equally important is the need to establish fair global collaboration standards that prioritize mutual exchange over economic dependency. Research should focus on how sustainable fashion partnerships can be restructured to create co-creative models that do not position artisans as mere suppliers but as equal stakeholders in the design and branding process. This necessitates a deeper examination of policy frameworks and governance models that ensure ethical labor standards are not externally imposed but rather developed with direct artisan participation.

Ultimately, future research must move beyond simply assessing whether collaborations provide economic benefits and instead examine how fashion partnerships can be reimagined to fundamentally shift power structures. The challenge lies not just in making sustainable fashion more ethical, but in ensuring that it is built upon a foundation of economic sovereignty, cultural agency, and long-term self-sufficiency for the artisans it seeks to empower.



Figure4. The image showcases a collection of handcrafted pouches, dyed in vibrant colors through traditional techniques. These products, created by Sierra Leonean artisans as part of the SIERRA2go initiative, encapsulate a fusion of cultural heritage and modern design, reflecting the artisans' craftsmanship and creative expression.

Declaration

The research content, data, and case studies related to SIERRA2go cited in this paper have obtained prior written authorization from the organization and strictly adhere to its stipulated scope of use. All information presented has undergone compliance verification and contains no confidential or undisclosed materials.

The authors hereby declare no potential conflicts of interest, including but not limited to financial support, commercial affiliations, or personal relationships that could influence the objectivity of this research. The study was conducted independently following academic integrity principles.

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