

CIRCULAR ECONOMY BUSINESS CASE STUDIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



Ock Pop Tok

- Luang Prabang, Laos
- Handicrafts/Textiles
- www.ockpoptok.com
- Analysis period: 2012-2023

Materials Recovery in Handicraft Textiles

Business Spotlight

Ock Pop Tok, a social enterprise based in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, has put environmental performance at the heart of its business strategy. From its creation 20 years ago, Ock Pop Tok decided to source all raw materials for its textiles locally and seasonally to minimise environmental impact. This initiative also reinforced the commitment of the enterprise to the local community by supporting local businesses and artisans. Giving a second life to Lao textiles is a part of Ock Pop Tok's design and product development philosophy and practice. Traditional textiles, when in good condition, can be repurposed for another use. For example, traditional wedding blankets become wall decorations. When only small parts of the traditional textiles can be used, they are repurposed into bags or clothing items. Ock Pop Tok also upcycles material such as aluminium cans to make discs that can substitute for the silver coins used in Akha¹ textiles. Upcycled, the aluminium adorns home-use items such as placemats, coasters and bags instead of ending up in landfills or waterways. These upcycled products are popular with tourists, which drives up demand for these products and, consequently, more work

and livelihood opportunities for the artisans. Ock Pop Tok is constantly on the lookout for producing more sustainable products by using more sustainable or eco-friendly materials such as natural dyes, or by repurposing or upcycling.

Keywords

Women's Empowerment, Natural and Organic, Tradition and Innovation

Innovation

Use and maintenance, End-of-life management, Resource circularity, Resource efficiency



¹ The Akha are an ethnic group who live in small villages at higher elevations in the mountains of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and the Yunnan Province in China.

Analysis of Ock Pop Tok

Context and baseline

Lao textiles are used every day and everywhere, so finding traditional Lao textiles in excellent condition is quite rare. The idea of circular products came from the need to address waste and the desire to make use of everything Ock Pop Tok acquires. To create alternatives for some products such as silver coins that often adorn traditional Lao textiles, the idea stemmed from the scarcity and high price of silver. Ock Pop Tok thus worked with Akha artisans in northern Laos to upcycle aluminium cans to make sparkling discs to use in lieu of the silver coins. This addressed several issues at the same time: fewer aluminium cans ending in landfills and waterways; lower price of the products due to use of aluminium instead of silver; and an opportunity for Ock Pop Tok to develop a new range of products showcasing this indigenous upcycling, resulting in an increase in its sales.



Innovation

Ock Pop Tok is first and foremost a handcraft textile and garment producer. Its circular products are made from textile waste that is upcycled into new textile items or are add-ons for textiles. Upcycling is not new per se but has gained new impetus from the desire to reduce waste textiles and aluminium cans. Both the design and manufacturing are addressed in Ock Pop Tok's circular innovation. Its design team was inspired by traditional Akha products and replaced the silver coins with upcycled aluminium discs. This innovation was new to the Lao

market when it was developed several years ago in close collaboration with Akha artisans, and the artisans started making and using them. The use of aluminium discs actually streamlined and increased production as artisans no longer had to look for rare and expensive silver coins.

Ock Pop Tok avoids unnecessary waste in its hospitality business. Ock Pop Tok's Silk Road Café does not sell plastic bottles nor do they use plastic straws. They use only glass water bottles and water refill stations, aluminium cans for soft drinks and bamboo straws. Ock Pop Tok installed a small biogas bag to turn its food waste into biogas, for use in kitchen, and the remaining organic residue is used in the garden. The remaining waste is taken by a local recycling partner called Patihoub.

Circular Economy impact

The upcycling of traditional textiles and aluminium cans for new handcraft textile items contributes to the circular economy through resource circularity which turns previously discarded materials and products into new products for a successive use cycle.

Silver coins are expensive, so these were previously used mostly for making the traditional Akha headdress for exclusive use in Laos by the Akha ethnic group. Ock Pop Tok used those coins as inspiration to have Akha artisans make more marketable and useful products for consumers globally, including tourists visiting Lao. They started upcycling aluminium cans to make discs that look like silver coins to use on home decor products and bags. Seventy to 75 discs can be made from one aluminium can. Ock Pop Tok estimates that it uses about 1115 cans per year to produce 1700 products for sale. This initiative thus results in 1115 aluminium cans being reused and diverted annually from landfills and waterways.

Ock Pop Tok also uses pieces of fabric leftover from items such as clothing or bags to make packaging for its bamboo straws, covers for SAA paper² notebooks and to make pencil cases. These require small pieces of fabric so instead of cutting into rolls of fabric, Ock Pop Tok just uses the leftover pieces from other products. The team collects all the usable waste and keeps it in stock for when it can be used.

The biogas bag processes around 120 kg food waste monthly, mostly from staff and group meals. From October 2023 to September 2024, Ock Pop Tok sent 348 kg of plastic trash to Patihoub, a recycling

2 SAA paper is a traditional handmade paper crafted from the bark of the mulberry tree.

company based in Luang Prabang. The amount of trash, however, varies significantly from month to month, ranging from 22 to 84 kg.

Business and market impact

Ock Pop Tok sources its aluminium cans from restaurants, including its own Silk Road Café. One aluminium can can be converted into 70 to 75 discs. Thirty-six discs are needed to make a coaster, 68 to make a placemat and 49 to make a clutch bag. Using genuine silver coins, which are in short supply, would make these products unaffordable and too precious for daily use. Having the artisans produce the discs themselves adds to their revenue while maintaining an acceptable cost and sale price. It has also allowed the scaling up of production.

Any additional income goes directly to the artisans who produce these discs. Ock Pop Tok works with 50 artisans in northern Laos on upcycled products. Before this partnership, the artisans' income was 3 million Laotian Kip per person per month (equivalent to approximately EUR125). Now, their income has increased by up to 50 per cent. The biogas use achieves a cost reduction of USD15-25 per month.

Stakeholders

Since Ock Pop Tok started using aluminium cans from 2012 onwards, it has been supplying the artisans with aluminium cans sourced from hospitality venues in Luang Prabang, a major tourist destination in Laos, and also collected from Ock Pop Tok's own café-restaurant. Having the artisans produce the aluminium discs themselves in lieu of using silver coins has increased their earnings. It has also enhanced their involvement in the production as they are now in charge of producing a part of the raw material they need to make the decorative items.

Implementation

Textile production is one of the many regular activities and sources of income for most artisans in Laos, generally as a side activity during the lean periods in farming. The philosophy behind the setting up of Ock Pop Tok was, and continues to be, to empower women through their traditional skills and to promote Laotian textiles and crafts across the globe. There is a market for the products but the artisans, being occupied with farming activities during part of the year, cannot dedicate 100 per cent of their working time to producing handicrafts. Ock Pop Tok aims for weaving and handicraft production to be its main source of income. Its products are in high demand; the main barrier is scaling up production to a commercial level. Ock Pop Tok therefore remunerates the artisans well to incentivise them to produce more.

Takeaways

Upcycled ethnic products are in great demand by tourists, both domestic and foreign. The waste resources used for these products are easy to obtain. This circular solution is therefore quite easy to implement, subject to having aesthetic and functional eco-designs. The key for this solution to work and last is to nurture good relations with the artisans who live in remote communities. Involving the community in product development and investing in continuous training and quality control has proven to produce quality and replicable results.

Artisans living in remote communities have practiced circular principles for generations. However, the take-make-waste practices are now entering their lives. Ock Pop Tok's circular initiative supports sustainable lifestyles, both the new and the old.

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