

Making scents of chaos

Afghan agriculture. You've heard about the Jasmine Revolution — here's one that started with orange blossoms



KIERON MONKS
Metro World News

Can perfume rebuild a shattered country? Barbara Stegemann says yes. The Canadian entrepreneur has given international development a chic twist, buying fair-trade herbs from crisis-hit nations to create her perfume line, The 7 Virtues.

The mission began in Afghanistan. After a soldier friend was wounded, Stegemann wanted to prove that economic empowerment could undermine the country's heroin economy and the Taliban that controls it. The path led to Jalalabad, a city famous for its orange blossoms, and a struggling supplier.

"He was about to give up," Stegemann recalls. "It was a financial risk but I wanted to show that another way is possible." She invested \$2,000 and, in 2010, launched her Afghanistan Orange Blossom fragrance. The first batch sold out and she soon secured financing through the hit TV show *Dragon's Den*.

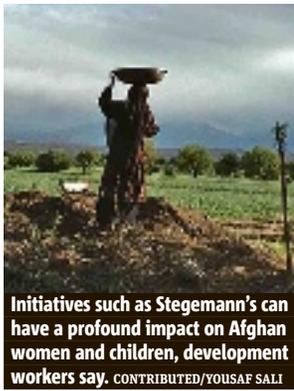
The investment allowed her supplier to develop his business and take on more staff. In turn,

Petal power



"We don't often have a way to touch peace, yet we own voting and buying power."

Barbara Stegemann, founder of The 7 Virtues Beauty Inc., on female empowerment through local development



Initiatives such as Stegemann's can have a profound impact on Afghan women and children, development workers say. CONTRIBUTED/YOUSAF SALI

this brought new investment in traditional Afghan products.

"This type of foreign involvement has made a positive change for the crafts," said Waheed Khalili, director of the Turquoise Mountain Institute for Afghan Arts and Architecture. In three years, employment has grown 70 per cent in the industry, he says.

Development NGOs believe such projects can have a lasting impact. "Giving ordinary Afghans the chance to find stable, legal work allows them to plan for the future, to improve their lives and that of their children," said Fernando Soares, deputy executive director of Mercy Corps. "This helps lay the foundations for a peaceful and productive Afghanistan."

The 7 Virtues has also made female empowerment an issue. Stegemann's suppliers are leading employers of women, and the profits have helped to expand schools for girls. Stegemann wants to see more female influence at home, too, and sees her perfume as a route into politics.

The scents are becoming more ambitious. The latest blends Israeli and Iranian ingredients for an anti-war protest. Stegemann is also lobbying Israeli politicians to help her establish a Palestinian distillery. But the causes are too important for politicians alone. "Citizens have to take action," she says. "If you stay the course, you will see results."



Looking into the future: Jalalabad-based distiller Abdullah Arsala says he believes perfume-making will expand as a positive business in war-torn Afghanistan. CONTRIBUTED/ABDULLAH ARSALA

Conflict. Perfume of peace

Stegemann is not the first to create a scent with a message. French perfume maker Francois Coty used his cosmetics empire to launch a fascist party before the Second World War, and became a hugely influential political figure.

More recently, Israeli-German photographer Daniel Josefsohn created the "MoslBudJewChristHinDao" fragrance

in an effort to promote religious tolerance. The name of the fragrance was later shortened to the easier "Unifaith."

With the U.S. election campaign in full swing, the perfumers at Bliss have made it an "eau-lection" with scents for both candidates. Supporters can show their colours by choosing between "Mint Romney" and Orange "O'bama."

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Jews and Muslims alike can enjoy a whiff of "Unifaith."

CONTRIBUTED/DANIEL JOSEFSOHN

Q&A

'The potential is huge'



Roses have been cultivated for centuries in Afghanistan. CONTRIBUTED/YOUSAF SALI

What is the tradition of Afghan perfume?

The first rose was distilled here and the oil has been used in Islamic medicine for centuries. The Jalalabad region was known for its gardens full of flowers and native plants, and the culture of making compounds from them.

How difficult is it for farmers to switch to perfume from poppy?

It's not easy to convince them because the poppy is quick and has more value. But the rose flowers here are the next best and the government has given subsidies for the first three years for farmers who switch, because that is how long it takes for them to bloom. If there is a group of farmers who switch together, the Taliban cannot fight them.

What is the future for your business?

Industrialized distillation is still new here and we have problems with energy and electricity. But the potential is huge and now we know the market will expand and employ more people.



ABDULLAH ARSALA
Perfume distiller in Jalalabad

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