

GIVING ARTISANS ACCESS

How Artisan Hub is helping connect traditional craftspeople in developing countries to new and potentially lucrative foreign markets

POSTED BY NIKI WILSON ON DECEMBER 20, 2017

In a small straw-roofed hut in Bangladesh's Narayanganj district, two women sit in front of a bamboo loom. Their hands fly back and forth across sections of fine threads, transforming them into a sheer, vibrantly patterned cotton fabric. They are practicing the ancient art of Jamdani weaving and will work on this piece for up to six months. When it's finished, it will be sold into a high-end domestic market, perhaps as a wedding sari. Despite the product's quality, however, the women will struggle to sell it far beyond Bangladesh's borders.

Breaking down export barriers and helping rural cottage-industry textile producers in eight developing countries — Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Lesotho, Madagascar, Nepal and Uganda — tap into the benefits of overseas markets is the motivation behind [Artisan Hub](#), a program [TFO \(Trade Facilitation Office\) Canada](#) launched in 2016 in collaboration with IDRC and with financial support from Global Affairs Canada.

In the case of Jamdani fabric, an Artisan Hub market-entry assessment revealed that the cloth has many qualities that appeal to international consumers. It's eco-friendly, breathable and attractive to a growing number of people interested in supporting handicrafts from developing nations — particularly those made by local women who are paid a fair wage. What's more, the fabric is a literal work of art, its intricate design and renowned quality earning it a place on UNESCO's list of items that represent the [intangible cultural heritage of humanity](#). "Craftsmanship is learned through individual supervision by a master craftsman, and apprenticeship takes two to three years," says [Rafat Alam](#), an assistant professor of economics at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton and co-author of the assessment. "What's missing," he adds, "is the connection with buyers and designers in modern markets."

Jamdani is typically designed as traditional clothing in Bangladesh and culturally similar countries. "To bring this product to the Canadian market, the industry needs to diversify," says Alam. This means understanding the tastes and preferences of western buyers and developing modern products that appeal to them.

And that's not the only hurdle. Alam says companies that produce the fabric also have much to learn about how to export and market it to foreign consumers, aspects of business that would require training and technical assistance.

Artisan Hub aims to address these challenges by creating opportunities for Jamdani producers to meet with western designers to learn how to produce clothing and home decor that has a more modern design. In August 2017, the program helped 30 artisans from the eight countries attend the [Apparel Textile Sourcing Show](#) in Toronto, where they exhibited their wares and connected with buyers and designers.



A woman weaves Jamdani fabric in Bangladesh. The fabric, which UNESCO has recognized as an item that represents the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, is one of many handicrafts on the Artisan Hub website. (Photo: Shutterstock)

In November 2017, members of the Artisan Hub team from TFO Canada and IDRC travelled to the [World Ethical Apparel Round Table](#) conference in Toronto, where they met with Canadian designers and showed them Artisan Hub products. "We gave a presentation on the artisans and the traditional textiles they make, and how these industries are empowering youth and women," says Mylène Bordeleau, a program management officer with IDRC.

This empowerment is important in an industry currently experiencing production declines in rural areas. That's because fewer young people are apprenticing for the craft, says Alam. Left unchecked, this trend threatens a disconnection with an important cultural practice that supports tight community networks and a sense of identity. Fair compensation, ethical work standards and sustainability from product diversification can all help grow an industry on which millions of livelihoods depend.

Trade policies that empower Jamdani producers may also be part of the answer. Bordeleau hopes that as projects such as Artisan Hub document their effectiveness, this evidence can be shared broadly with other organizations that help rural cottage industries expand into new markets. "Ultimately," she says, "we want to see policies and programs become more supportive to specialty textile artisans."

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READING AS THINKING

Before you read the article:

1. Reflect upon the title and the picture. What are eight words that come to mind about the article's subject matter?

After reading the article:

2. Circle keywords and underline the main ideas in the article. Use this information to summarize the article with pictures.

3. Why is Jamdani fabric appealing to international consumers?

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4. What is the importance of Jamdani fabric?

5. Why do you think the women of Bangladesh struggle to sell Jamdani fabric beyond their country's borders?

6. a) Why is empowerment important in the traditional textile industry?

b) Give an example of when you felt empowered. What happened? How did it make you feel afterward?

7. Rafat Alam says, "To bring this product to the Canadian market, the industry needs to diversify." How can the product be diversified for the Canadian market?

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Prepare-Think-Pair-Share

8. *Prepare*

As a class, make selections from [UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity lists](#). Using [Google My Maps](#) or [Google Tour Builder](#), map your selections and make a profile for each.

9. *Think*

Reflect on your cultural heritage. Make a categorized list of stories, objects, people, ideas, knowledge, etc., that are of cultural importance to you.

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10. *Pair*

Compare your answers with a partner or your team. Using [Google My Maps](#) or [Google Tour Builder](#), map out your cultural heritages and explain in your My Map or Tour the significance to you and your team of each story, object, person, idea, etc.

11. *Share*

Share the map you made with the class.

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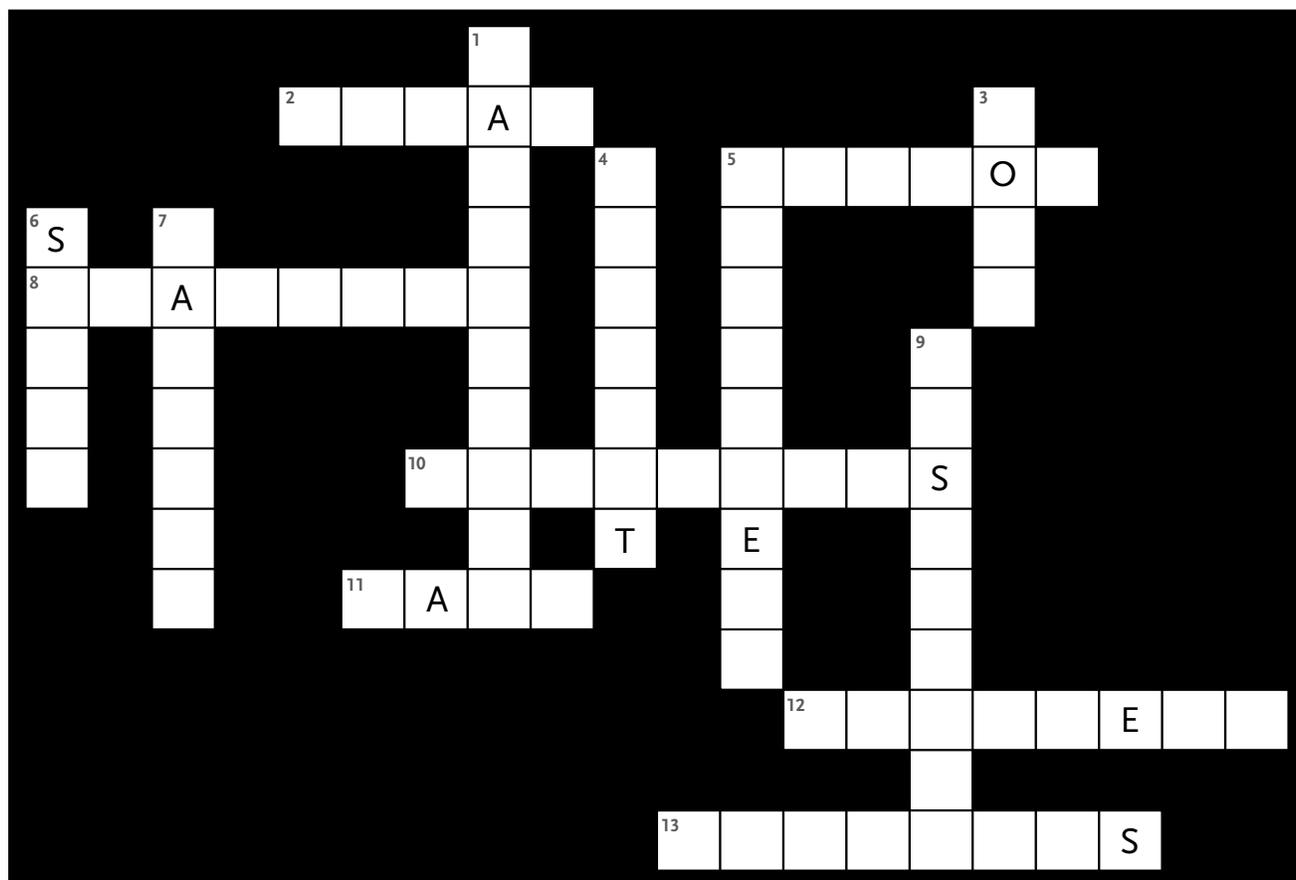
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ONLINE

1. Using [Google Maps](#) or [Google Earth](#), locate the Narayanganj district and explore it by using Street View and the satellite and map modes. Using the quick facts section and other research tools find the following:
 - a. the population of the district
 - b. the neighbouring districts
 - c. the major bodies of water
 - d. the major cities
2. Using online maps and pictures, find rural communities in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Lesotho, Madagascar, Nepal and Uganda. Compare and contrast the landscapes.
3. Visit the [Artisan Hub website](#) and choose one of the three categories listed under “Fashion Accessories.” Use [Google My Maps](#) to map the different accessories from around the world and tell the story of how they are exported.
4. Learn more about the [traditional art of Jamdani weaving](#).
5. Use the [search function on the TFO Canada website](#) to find products from foreign suppliers. Which products do you find the most interesting? Why?
6. Research different weaving techniques and compare them to Jamdani weaving.

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CROSSWORD:

Across

2. In the country
5. The type of fabric Jamdani weaving produces
8. Companies that produce the Jamdani fabric will require this to export and market their products
10. Rafat Alam is an assistant professor in this subject
11. A garment women in Bangladesh wear
12. Abroad
13. Those who produce specialty textiles

Down

1. One of the eight developing countries that produce textiles and participate in the Artisan Hub program
3. Used for weaving
4. Colourful
5. Those who buy
6. Building material used in Narayanganj district
7. The ancient style of weaving practiced in Bangladesh
9. At the Apparel Textile Sourcing Show in Toronto, 30 artisans were connected with buyers and these