

# STEPS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

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For thirty years, Label STEP has been raising ethical standards within the rug world, with benefits for the weavers but also for the industry's future. **Lucy Upward** speaks to Reto Aschwanden, the organisation's managing director

## Who's the driving force behind Label STEP?

Label STEP was founded 1995 by prominent Swiss development organisations, in collaboration with the country's rug retailer association. As a not-for-profit entity, STEP has no commercial agenda—all resources are dedicated to our core mission of promoting the well-being of artisans in the carpet industry.

While our head office in Switzerland is our smallest branch, with me as the only

employee, the majority of our staff are located in our country offices in Nepal, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Morocco. These fifty-plus highly motivated and skilled local employees are STEP's most valuable asset. Equally crucial are our nearly 100 certified partners worldwide—rug brands and retailers whose commitment and access to supply chains are fundamental to the STEP fair trade system.

## Why is fair trade important in rug weaving?

Carpet weaving can be a transformative industry, particularly in economically disadvantaged and rural areas where job opportunities are scarce. In many regions, it offers a compelling option for women, enabling them to work from home or in village workshops and flexibly manage their hours around household chores and farming.

However, traditional industry

**01** Weavers working on a traditional loom in their house in Aqcha district in northern Afghanistan

**02** Traditional meets contemporary design—a weaver in Taznakht, southern Morocco

**03** Establishing more workshops exclusively for women artisans, as here in Rajasthan, could help India combat reductions in its weaving workforce



Photo: Amit Shrivastava

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structures present significant challenges. Decentralised supply chains often isolate weavers, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, and the informal nature of the craft often denies artisans basic worker rights and social security. Fair trade serves as a powerful tool to bridge these critical gaps.

## You have been with STEP for twenty years. What are the biggest shifts you have witnessed in our industry?

While the market environment remains challenging for many companies and production areas, I believe the overall quality of contemporary handmade rugs has improved significantly, making them more exciting and innovative than ever. There's a growing appreciation among rug buyers for craftsmanship and authenticity, alongside increased awareness of social and environmental issues. From our perspective, and despite many challenges remaining, the most significant and gratifying change has been the considerable improvement in

Photo: Randi Fritzbak

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# CONSUMERS EXPECT THEIR RUGS TO BE PRODUCED WITHOUT HARMING THE ENVIRONMENT

the situation of weavers and artisans on the ground.

## How would you describe the weavers' situation today?

Our recent weaver survey, which we believe is the most comprehensive ever conducted in the rug industry, analysed data from over 13,000 weavers and interviewed 200 of them across seven production countries. In summary, weavers value the income opportunities, take pride in their skills, and recognise the cultural and social significance of their craft. However, they also highlight insufficient wages, a lack of social security, and low social status. The consequences of these shortcomings are evident when visiting weaving areas today: a dwindling number of young people on the looms and producers increasingly struggling to find qualified artisans.

## So what do you think needs to be done to secure the future of rug weaving?

The industry must prioritise improving job attractiveness. With more diverse job opportunities now available for young people in weaving areas, producers must intensify their efforts to present themselves as appealing employers. This includes not only competitive wages but also other job benefits and improved working conditions. Furthermore, a concerted effort is needed to promote the craft sectors and elevate

Photo: Amit Shog

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their prestige within production countries. Many companies are already making progress in implementing these changes, but these initiatives need further strengthening and scaling up.

## What other issues will keep us busy and discussing?

Beyond these necessary investments in the workforce, I anticipate that consumer attitudes towards handmade rugs will continue to evolve. Consumers increasingly view rugs as luxury products, valuing their craftsmanship, cultural heritage and authentic, unique character.

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Photo: Amit Shog

# CARPET WEAVING CAN BE TRANSFORMATIVE, PARTICULARLY IN DISADVANTAGED AND RURAL AREAS



**04** Like most production countries, India faces an ageing workforce. It is crucial to make the industry appealing to young people while simultaneously increasing support for older artisans

**05** A winning combination: natural raw materials and skilled artisans.

**06** Family business: husband and wife working on a rug in Agra, India

**07** Producing handmade rugs includes dozens of steps, each carried out by skilled artisans. Kathmandu, Nepal

Photo: Label STEP



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Photo: Amit Shog



Expectations for product and production transparency will also intensify, encompassing not only social aspects but also environmental sustainability. Consumers expect their rugs to be produced without harming the environment and will probably increasingly demand exclusively high-quality natural fibres over mass-produced synthetic materials. Organic and animal welfare certifications for raw materials will also gain greater importance.

Handmade rugs have endured for millennia, and I am confident that creative, innovative brands will continue to flourish, create a positive impact in weaving communities, and delight us with exquisite rugs.

[www.label-step.org](http://www.label-step.org)