

[Buyers Guide]



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# Weaving

## Afghanistan's future

What is the state of weaving in Afghanistan? Reto Aschwanden of Label STEP discusses how carpet weaving and his organisation can contribute to a better future for the war-ravaged country

Afghanistan is one of the traditional centres of carpet culture. After decades of war, political commotion and economic setbacks the country is making its comeback to the international carpet market with state of the art contemporary design rugs. Increasingly more carpet galleries around the world carry ranges of Afghan carpets, and its firms have become a serial winners at Domotex's Carpet Design Awards.

Perhaps the most prominent face of this 'New Afghan Wave' is Rahim Walizada of Chuk Palu. Perfectly reconciling contemporary style with local tradition and ancient techniques, he is one of today's most successful carpet designers. Equally noteworthy are the Afghan

collections by Mischioff. "You don't get that special Afghan look anywhere else. The hand-spun wool is great. And the weaving breathes culture and tradition, also in contemporary design. It may be less perfect or complex than in Nepal but it's more vital and has a wonderful nomadic touch," explains Sascha Mischioff explains. Other great Afghan carpets are made today by companies such as Ariana Rugs, Oritop, Hali Weavers, Pacific Collection and Amadi.

It is hard to ally the beauty of these carpets to harsh realities of the place where they are made. Afghanistan is the world's second least developed country. Eighty per cent of females and fifty per cent of males do not have access to education facilities. Considering that one third of the population lives below the poverty line and knowing that carpets are woven in the most remote regions by people who are among the country's poorest – the majority of them women – the socio-economic importance of carpet production cannot be underestimated. The industry is estimated to provide employment to around one million people and produces Afghanistan's main export good.

It is in this context that the 'fair trade carpet initiative' Label STEP has opened an Afghanistan office with the goal of helping to improve



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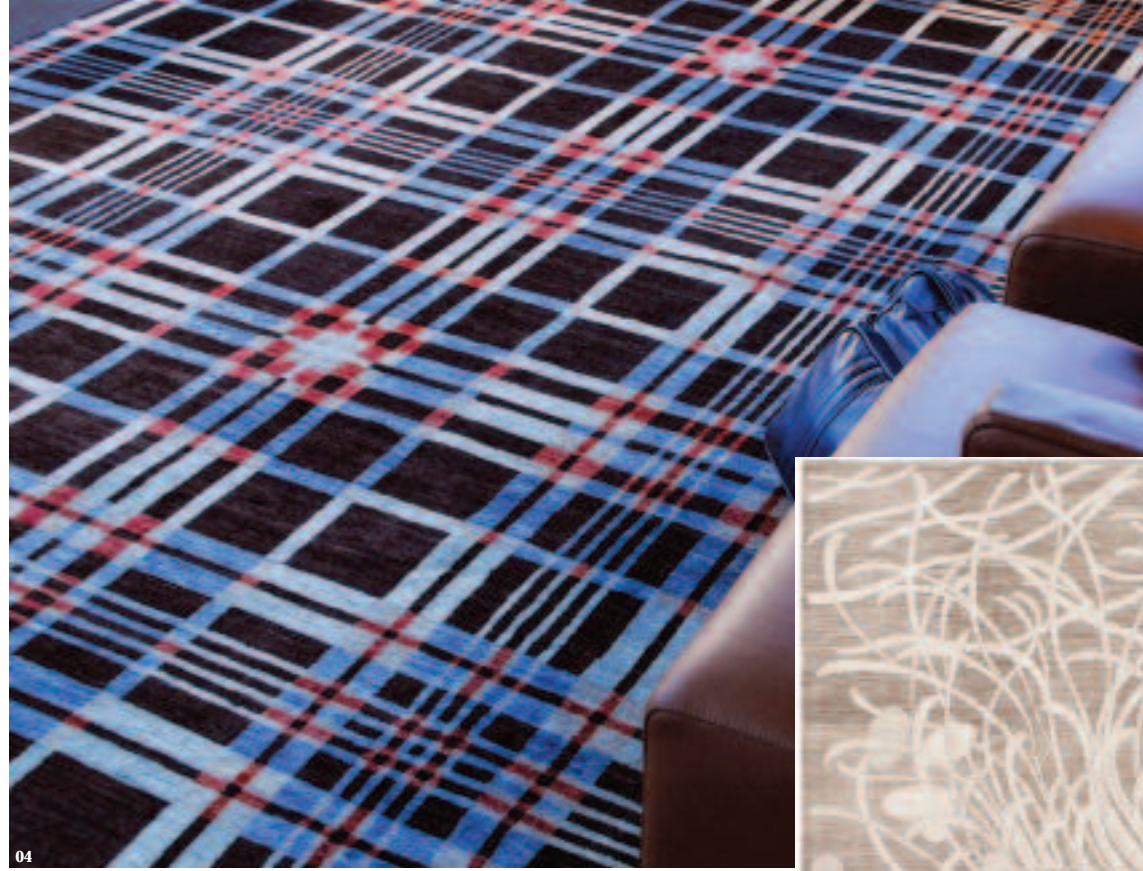


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01 Mohabat, Chuk Palu, Kabul

02 Afghani weavers

03 Afghani weavers



04 Darya, Mischoff, Zurich  
05 Rug by Ariana, Los Angeles



the weavers' working and living conditions as well as contributing to the sustainability of the country's carpet culture and industry with the support of the German development agency GIZ. The Swiss organisation started its activities with a baseline study on the weavers' situation to learn about their needs and develop appropriate projects. Results of a survey conducted with one thousand weavers in twenty villages in North-Afghanistan (where the majority of carpets comes from) confirm that most families live in very basic conditions and carpet-weaving in their homes is the main source of income. Weaving skills have been passed on from generation to generation, and help from children in producing carpets is very common – especially among girls, the majority of whom do not attend school. It is important to mention is that this is common practice all over the country and is not limited to the carpet-weaving community.

Despite the difficulties of earning a living for Afghans, the carpet industry is facing the same problem as many other production countries: a lack of weavers. Large numbers of weavers quitting the job is a clear indication that salaries are too low. This is a clear indication that good working conditions and fair wages are not only in the interest of the workers but of the entire industry. Many companies have understood this and introduced programmes to

provide attractive employment. Rahim Walizada: "In the past I have produced on two thousand looms, today I have only 800 to 900. Therefore I've launched a vocational training project in the North-Eastern province of Badakshan. Local communities traditionally involved in carpet weaving learn new techniques and designs under the supervision of Chuk Palu weavers from Mazar region. New looms are set up to produce larger carpets demanded by the international markets." Label STEP encourages such initiatives and plans to offer its services as a platform for an dialogue between all stakeholders in order to establish the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and to contribute to the industry's sustainability.

Almost all Afghanistan's carpets are still finished and end washed in Pakistan and exported from there as Pakistani carpets, even though the majority of Afghan refugees who lived and worked in Pakistan have returned to their homeland. International development agencies and organisations try to 'repatriate' the value chain to keep a larger portion of the profits in the country. New washing facilities are set up in Kabul (with the support of agencies such as USAID) and in Mazar-i-Sharif. Further improvement in logistics and bureaucracy are also needed to significantly increase direct Afghan carpet exports.

Despite the many challenges faced, Rahim Walizada is optimistic about the future: "I think we will overcome the problems and one day Afghanistan will even lead the market for handmade carpets". Label STEP believes that the carpet industry has the potential to make a great contribution to the country's economic development through providing a livelihood to millions of people, especially in remote rural areas. Therefore the industry has to be fair. With the support of socially responsible companies and conscious carpet lovers around the world it will.

*This report is published under the media partnership between COVER and Label STEP [www.label-step.org](http://www.label-step.org) [info@label-step.org](mailto:info@label-step.org)*