



Meet in Africa

With four events in eight years the founders of the Meet in Africa concept have every reason to be pleased. The African industry has watched the event move from what was an exploratory meeting and educational format to a full-blooded trade fair, and each time the reports get more positive.

Not that this is such a huge event. With 270 exhibitors and just over 2,000 visitors this October's presentation did not need a huge space, fitting essentially into the underground car park of the UNECA (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa) building. Yet, like the early days of the Hong Kong show, leather trade diehards know that meetings in car parks can be very productive. This was the case in Addis Ababa.

Driving forward

For many of the delegates the positive aspects began at the new airport where the facilities and reception were excellent, with the organisers out helping even for those arriving at 3am. The UNECA building was outstanding and many of the guests stayed either at the old favourite Hilton hotel, or at the spectacular new Sheraton which makes some of the developed world's five star hotels look distinctly three star. Despite the fact that everyone knows that just a few kilometres out of town life is hard and the roads still not re-metalled after the destruction by the Mengistu tanks much has been done and the progress and development is startling.

In the show itself it was clear that the Ethiopian tanners are not satisfied with the status quo. Everyone was on the move. It was not a question of whether the industry will move to sell finished leather but how soon and what this means for the many buyers of part processed material present.

Attracting foreign interest

For while this was an African event and many African nations were present amongst the exhibitors it was certainly a trade show which was dominated by its hosts, not least by their clear determination to plan the next steps of moving along the value added chain. With the Economist newspaper (May 22 2004) saying that Prime Minister Ato Meles has "the most insightful, indeed ingenious, ideas about rural development of any leader in Ethiopia's modern history" and the minister for industry articulating those views in terms of leather to the Assembly of the African Federation of Leather and Allied Industries (AFLAI), one can see where the momentum is coming from.

This is useful for other aspects of the leather industry. Africa has clearly become a focus of attention for the leather machinery industry and the Italian Association ASSOMAC was there in force building relationships. Equally, the European chemical

industry had quite a strong presence noting that a move to crust and finished leather will start to have a big impact.

Mr Alemayhu of Wallia Tannery who is the vice president of the Ethiopian Tanners Association indicated that he was pleased with the event and especially the fact that the non-Ethiopian exhibitors also appeared satisfied with their participation. Talking about Ethiopia he said "the Ethiopian leather industry is changing now. Over the next five years many partners will need to be involved in this change. In this country there are already too many tanners to pickle and wet blue for the raw material and everybody is planning to upgrade their product, at least to crust stage. At this rate the industry will be totally changed in five years."

Leadership has been taken in this development by ELICO, the major tanning group which developed in the 1990s when the government tanneries were privatised. With two tanneries and a garment factory the company has already ceased selling part processed material. However with the market place open Mr Alemayhu does not believe that ELICO will either wish or be able to create a monopolistic position. The company's fashion show on the penultimate night was a strong feature in showing its potential and that names like Africa and Addis can fit well with style and culture.

Projects to improve quality

Attention is also being paid in Ethiopia to eradicate tick diseases ("ekek") and other projects to improve sheep shearing and even to help rural tanners eradicate foul smells from their finished leather. Up to 30% of the Ethiopian raw material is still used in the rural economy, much in the format of raw hide or parchment.

The Egyptians also had a significant presence and the 2006 event seems certain to be held in Cairo. The positive approach means that more of the sub Saharan countries will start to look at making the best of their raw material and at building aggressively on the Out of Africa image, rather than the nervous historic approach which has fuelled customers' uncertainties.

At the AFLAI General Assembly Mr Hechemi Cherif resigned from his post as president. According to the Memorandum and Articles of the Pan-African Federation, a six-month provisional committee has been constituted with two vice-presidents: Mr Badada, president of the Tanners Association (Ethiopia), assisted by André Pelser (South Africa) and a secretary Sam Kiruthu (Esalia, Kenya).

The SIC Group, which has contributed with its know-how and experience in international promotion and the logistics of the event since the origins of the project in 1998, has confirmed its wish to continue its involvement in the organisation of the fair in 2006. ●



UK Prime Minister Tony Blair took the opportunity to visit Meet in Africa and is seen here with Pittards Director Reg Hankey.