From Waste to Worth: Pili Luna, Ocean Leather and Community Empowerment in Latin America - A Case Study

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This white paper is based on a case study developed by Hecho por Nosotros. The authors contributed equally to this work.
This work was supported by the contributions and insights of Pili Luna, founder of Vos Honduras. We also thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback.
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Executive Summary

Circular fashion plays a crucial role in Latin America due to the indigenous civilizations that have been practicing artisanal skills for generations. Historically, women have been at the center of these activities, protecting artisanal knowledge while maintaining livelihoods, particularly in rural and coastal areas. However, industrialization, colonial legacies, and the prevalence of low-cost imported textiles have marginalized traditional practices. As the world's interest in sustainability grows, Latin America is being highlighted as a centre of innovation where the concepts of the circular economy and artisanal knowledge meet.

This white paper produced by Hecho por Nosotros (HxN), an international NGO promoting systemic change in fashion and sustainability, highlights the case of Pili Luna, founder of Vos Honduras. Through her innovative “Ocean Leather” initiative, Pili Luna transforms discarded fish skins from the Honduran artisanal fishing sector, into high-quality luxury leather goods.

Beyond material innovation, Pili Luna’s work is deeply rooted in community empowerment. This case study explores how culturally grounded circular enterprises like Pili Luna are redefining the future of fashion in the Global South. It provides insights for policymakers, industry leaders and investors seeking to support models that are socially regenerative, environmentally restorative and economically viable, offering guidance for the systemic change the fashion industry urgently requires.

Keywords: fish leather, circular economy, sustainable fashion, community empowerment, Latin America, social entrepreneurship.

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1. Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the most resource-intensive sectors in the global economy, generating massive volumes of waste and pollution each year. The magnitude of the issue is demonstrated by the fact that the fashion sector, which is estimated to be worth £1.84 trillion, accounts for between 8% and 10% of global carbon emissions (United Nations Climate Change, 2018). The idea of circular fashion has become a crucial reaction as rapid fashion speeds up unsustainable patterns of consumption and disposal. In circular fashion, garments and accessories are rethought as components of a closed-loop system, whereby items are purposefully made to be recyclable, repairable, biodegradable, and reused. Instead of depleting natural systems, the objective is to prolong lifecycles, reduce waste, and regenerate them.

> Circular fashion is a system where the manufacture of an item and the end of its life are equally as important, as the aim is to prevent waste by intentionally designing items to be reusable, repairable, biodegradable and recyclable. (…) At the core of this concept is knowing where things come from, what they are made of who made them, and being accountable for the overall lifecycle of our belongings (Hill, 2024, “What does circular fashion mean?" section).

This white paper explores these principles within the context of Latin America and the Global South, a term that is not only a geographic designation, but also a political and historical one. This concept is broadly used to describe regions in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania that share histories of colonial marginalization and ongoing structural inequities (Dados & Connell, 2012). Pili Luna, founder of Vos Honduras, cites that 3.2 million tonnes of fish skin are discarded annually from global artisanal fishing for human consumption alone (excluding industrial fishing). To address this waste, she launched an initiative to train fishing communities in tanning these discarded skins, which are then upcycled into leather-like accessories (Acosta, 2023). The aim is to create a closed-loop system wherein the lifecycle of the clothing we use can be extended, minimizing waste and the impact that fashion has had on the environment.

1.1 Why artisanal fashion matters in Latin America (LATAM).

Latin America has a rich history of artisanal craftsmanship, from the development of high quality raw sustainable materials/textiles such as cotton, wool and alpaca to a long-established culture in creating traditional garments and artisanal clothing, rooted largely in indigenous and rural communities and driven by women as the key makers.

Artisanal fashion matters deeply in Latin America for a mix of cultural, economic, social, and political reasons. It's not just about clothing; it's about identity, heritage, resistance, and in many cases, also survival.

2. Historical Context

According to Bellini (2009), “The textile industry is one of the oldest productive activities in Latin America. In the Andes and Mesoamerica, textile production was already very important in pre-Hispanic times and continued to be so during the centuries of colonial domination”.

Women have historically played a dominant role in artisanal clothing production in Latin America, particularly in indigenous and rural communities, and has continued—though evolved—through colonial and modern times.

> Fashion in Latin America has long been more than a mere aesthetic practice. It is an essential tool of cultural expression, resistance, and identity formation. Rooted in centuries-old Indigenous weaving traditions, the region's textiles carry profound historical, political, and social significance. However, the legacy of colonialism has deeply impacted the development of Latin American fashion, as European influences disrupted Indigenous textile production and imposed Western aesthetic hierarchies (Srinidhi, 2025, "Introduction" section, para 1).

Spanish colonization changed the scope of the textile industry in LATAM, and even more so among these communities.

> Analyzing fashion through this lens reveals that its dominant structures are deeply embedded in the colonial matrix, privileging Western institutions, aesthetics, and epistemologies while systematically erasing or marginalizing non-Western ways of knowing. The global fashion system has long functioned as a mechanism of coloniality, where the Euro-American gaze determines value, trends, and legitimacy, relegating Indigenous and non-Western expressions to the margins or appropriating them without acknowledgment (Srinidhi, 2025, "Introduction" section, para 5).

Post-colonialism, the changes the Spanish imposed on the textile industry left an indelible mark. The local textile economy continued to be undermined by European imports/materials and the indigenous weavers/textile workers remained compromised.

While industrialization helped larger LATAM nations develop textile manufacturing hubs, and the 20th Century ushered in a growth in production being offshored to LATAM - largely focused on entry level priced goods - it also ultimately brought new challenges.

> There was a decrease in Latin American textile markets due to the introduction of products from Asian countries. On the one hand, this scenario has put much pressure on Latin American countries to improve their textile products quality, a way to give a better value for their local consumers. On the other hand, labour costs in Latin America are increasing due to its economic development, which has been a big challenge for Latin American textile industries to compete in the international market (Jarpa & Halog, 2021, Abstract section).

The growing interest in slow fashion and the circular economy, however, has helped to renew interest in LATAM. With its premium quality animal and plant fibers, and historically rich traditions in weaving, embroidery and garment making, LATAM has emerged as an important hub for developing sustainable fashion, using traditional methods in innovative ways and, thus, slowly boosting local and rural economies.

3. Circularity: Global vs. Local Definitions

With the continued growth of fast fashion consumption and disposal, parallel with circular economy models in constant development, it has become even more crucial for the establishment of a global level of standardization, supply chains, quality control and sustainable certifications, while allowing for localization that can optimize existing local industries, raw materials, facilities, traditions and talent.

Although some advancement has been made in developing legislation to guide, regulate, and monitor the fashion industry and its impact on the environment, consensus on a global scale has been complicated. NGOs with global perspectives, such as Ellen MacArthur Foundation, as well as government bodies such as the UN and the European Union, have been at the forefront of the effort to standardize and provide guidelines that can be applicable on a global scale. The EU's approach includes both broad strategies for sustainable textiles (European Parliament, 2025a) and specific new waste legislation (European Parliament, 2025b). One such metric is the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) developed by a mixed body and presented by the UN as a list of benchmarks by which all sectors of the fashion industry can measure their progress in building more sustainable, less wasteful circular business models (UN, 2025).

> When the European Union began implementing circular economy policies, it thought about industry and non-renewable materials. But there is the other side of the circular economy that deals with biological resources... Indigenous knowledge is fundamental... as indigenous communities know how to produce while maintaining the regenerative capacities of nature and the ecosystem. Circularity is, and always has been, central to indigenous practices (Randall, 2025, para. 24).

To effectively implement the SDGs in Latin America, it's essential to respect and integrate local traditions, cultures, and knowledge systems that have often been passed down for generations. Engaging local communities in planning and decision-making would help to ensure an inclusive approach and participatory development. Additionally, incorporating traditional knowledge, promoting intercultural education that values Indigenous languages and worldviews, while also addressing gender equality in culturally sensitive ways that empower women without disregarding traditional roles, would strengthen the communities to drive innovation and support their local economies that would sustain both their livelihoods and their cultural identities. The key is to blend global goals with local values, ensuring development is inclusive, respectful, and sustainable.

A prime example of a brand that has been seamlessly blending local values and traditions while empowering women to drive growth in their communities is Pili Luna.

4. Case Study: Vos Honduras - Ocean Leather project

4.1. Who they are

Vos Honduras was founded by Pili Luna in 2014 in Honduras. Their mission was to promote inclusive socio-economic and environmentally sustainable development through design, crafting chic accessories from natural and cultural resources (Pili Luna, n.d).

The fundamental business concept centers on fashion accessories (e.g. bags, totes) made from fish leather, transforming fishing waste (fish hides that might otherwise be discarded). The "Scarlett" bag, crafted from upcycled Tilapia leather by artisans in Honduras is a great example, see Figure 1. This piece exemplifies Pili Luna's mission to transform fishing industry byproducts into durable, luxury accessories while supporting Honduran artisans (Pili Luna [@pilllunastore], 2023, para. 2). Pili works with women from coastal and fishing communities, including the Garifuna and Miskito peoples.

> We specialize in creating exotic, premium leather made from fish skin discarded by artisanal filleting cooperatives on the northern coasts of Central America. Our mission is rooted in preventing ocean acidification and empowering women, families, and communities by leveraging existing resources for growth, innovation, and transformation (Pili Luna, n.d.-a, paras. 2-3).

Furthermore, the organization's business approach is defined by its aim to "generate impactful and sustainable business models for creating and expanding entrepreneurial ecosystem hubs, while addressing the growing demand for sustainable and ethically sourced materials" (Pili Luna, n.d.-a, para. 3).

Figure 1
Artisan-Crafted "Scarlett" Bag from Upcycled Tilapia Leather

Note. From Meet Scarlett, the lively red bag made from recovered fish skins that were previously discarded as waste [Photograph], by Pili Luna [@pilllunastore], 2023, Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/pilllunastore/). Copyright 2023 by Pili Luna.

4.2. What they do

Using discarded fish skins from the local fishing industry (Tilapia, Corbina, Tuna) and other species that meet size requirements to protect reproductive cycles, has helped local communities build a business, where they create a sustainable and viable material that can replace cow leather and is just as durable and commercially appealing.

Pili Luna's venture is powered by a unique, self-developed tanning formula. This organic solution, which she designed to be non-polluting, uses ingredients like alcohol to replace toxic chromium, effectively preventing water contamination (Figure 2). These two elements together can be supplied/sourced by international designers for fashion products such as handbags and shoes, thus creating a new pipeline and source of income for local communities, largely driven by women, that previously had been languishing economically.

Figure 2

Application of Organic Tanning Solution to Fish Leather

Note. Artisan is applying Pili Luna's proprietary organic tanning solution to fish leather. The non-polluting process used by Vos Honduras. From Pili Luna, la hondureña que trasciende fronteras con la marca Vos Honduras, productora de zapatos con cuero de pescado, by J. E. Rodas, 2021, Tunota (https://www.tunota.com/honduras-hoy/pili-luna-creadora-marca-zapatos-vos-honduras-entrevista-tunota-com). Copyright 2021 by José Elías Rodas. Reprinted with permission.

4.3. Circular practices

In keeping with building a true sustainable brand, Pili Luna has centered the business model around no-waste production, low-impact treatment processes and community collaboration. As shown in the following Table 1:

Table 1

Circular Practices in Pili Luna's Business Model

Practice	Description	References
Waste valorization	Fish skins from fishing by-products as its primary raw material. Used as a cow leather substitute, thereby reducing organic waste from fisheries.	La Concordia. (2022).
Local sourcing & craftsmanship	Materials and labor sourced in Honduras; works directly with local fishermen, cooperatives, and artisans (many of whom are women), empowering them to build their own businesses as suppliers; works with large exporters like Regal Springs.	N/A (General Operations)
Limited quantities / small batches	Very limited quantities are produced to minimize over-production.	Pili Luna. (n.d.).
Durability & timeless design	Pieces are designed as long-lasting art objects (e.g., "Scarlett," "Pia") rather than following fast fashion trends.	Pili Luna. (n.d.).
Low impact process	The tanning process is specifically designed to be non-polluting, requiring no disposal of chemical runoff, making it safe for vulnerable aquatic ecosystems.	N/A (Process Detail)
Material Innovation	Explores further circularity by developing uses for other waste streams, such as fish scales for collagen extraction in the pharmaceutical industry.	N/A (Future/Ongoing Research)

Note. This table summarizes the core circular practices adopted by Pili Luna.

4.4. Social and environmental impact

Working closely with the community has had such a positive impact on the local community. By upcycling fish by-products, *Vos Honduras* prevents organic waste and reduces the environmental

burden of waste disposal (La Conceria, 2022). By creating value from waste, Pili Luna opens income streams from a material otherwise seen as disposable.
On a social scale, this project empowers indigenous women fishers: “Pía … a tribute … to the indomitable energy and tireless efforts of indigenous women fishers who gather at the break of dawn.” (Pili Luna, n.d.-b, para. 1).

Pili has trained over 1,200 women across Central America. The retention rate for serious entrepreneurs is ~30%, creating a sustainable supplier network. The artisans are paid US$5 (approximately £4) per square foot for finished leather, a life-changing rate that far exceeds local norms and empowers them to become business owners. On a broader scale, this initiative has had a more profound qualitative impact: before the program, many women in these communities faced difficult situations, often lacking income and trapped in toxic relationships due to complete dependence on husbands or relatives. Now, as a direct result of the initiative, these women are freed from such toxic relationships, their children can continue their education, and communities gain a stable source of income that significantly reduces dependence on remittances or illicit activities (Hecho por Nosotros, 2025; Pili Luna, 2022a, 2022b).

On the commercial scale, Vos Honduras / Pili Luna has utilized approximately 300 lbs (136 kg) of fish skin waste, producing between 500 - 1000 square feet of leather over one year. Pili Luna has succeeded, in her training women to become her suppliers, in creating a consistent supply chain. Her business cannot exist without them, and their businesses are sustained by her purchases. This creates a mutual dependency that ensures continuity (Hecho por Nosotros, 2025).

5. Challenges and Opportunities

In 2024, Vos Honduras entered into a partnership with Regal Springs, an international premiere tilapia producer and exporter, who has been present in Honduras since 1998. The goal of this partnership was to cultivate the fish skins from the fishing activities that Regal Springs was cultivating in the region (Figure 3). This joint venture has created a steadier stream of available materials to cultivate and monetize. A high interest from the luxury market in the US and Europe indicates potential for massive scale through this joint venture and can ensure steady and ethical sourcing on both parts. Additionally, innovation into new product lines, such as pharmaceutical collagen, can provide another commercial avenue that can generate another source of income. These opportunities can potentially provide access to industry certifications, as well as access to international sustainable platforms that can provide support in further growth (Hecho por Nosotros, 2025; Regal Springs, n.d.).

Figure 3

Site Visit with Regal Springs and Women Artisans in Honduras

Note. Regal Springs CEO Alois Hofbauer and Pili Luna during a site visit to the sustainable skins project, meeting with women artisans from Santa Cruz de Yojoa, Honduras. From Regal Springs CEO visits sustainable skins project [Image], by Regal Springs [@regalsprings], 2025, LinkedIn (https://www.linkedin.com/posts/regal-springs-tilapia_proyectopielessostenibles-activity-7310977964278439936-EbJb/). Copyright 2025 by Regal Springs. Reprinted with permission.

The artisanal garments created with the sustainably cultivated fish leather preserves indigenous and local traditions that predate colonialism by centuries. Global visibility of Pili Luna/Vos Honduras helps fight stereotypes and builds respect for the region's deep cultural wealth.

With these opportunities, however, also come some challenges; the greatest being the ability to balance ethical growth with capacity. Pili Luna / Vos Honduras only trains communities when there's a guaranteed market for their products, ensuring no false promises. Even so, Pili Luna is often competing against factors in the community that can threaten continuity such as 1) Remittances: Women don't need to work if family abroad sends money. 2) Narco-Trafficking: This is the "main competition" as it offers easier, faster money. These challenges shown in Table 2 can impede progress and growth of the venture in the community on a long-term basis (Hecho por Nosotros, 2025).

High shipping and logistics costs from Honduras are also prohibitive. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's Review of Maritime Transport 2024 (UNCTAD, 2024), reveals severe challenges facing the maritime sector in Latin America and the Caribbean. Climate disruptions, geopolitical crises, and trade imbalances have significantly impacted the region, with disruptions in the

Panama Canal serving as a stark example of the wider issues. Severe drought in 2023 and early 2024 reduced water levels in the Panama Canal, forcing ships to take longer, more expensive routes. This hit trade from the Americas to Asia particularly hard (United Nations Caribbean, 2024).

Overcoming consumer taboos about products made from fish (e.g., misconceptions about lingering odors) is another hurdle to get past. This requires educating consumers on its durability and sustainability, highlighting that it is often stronger than traditional leathers and made from by-products of the fishing industry. Sharing examples of its historical use and modern applications in fashion can also help shift perceptions. Its application in luxury goods provides another level of validation as premium quality material. However, navigating the desire for global luxury market recognition, while staying true to the artisanal, community-focused roots of the production, is a fine line to walk.

Table 2

Challenges to Scaling the Sustainable Fish Leather Venture

Challenges	Description
Scaling responsibly	Limited batches may limit revenue or reach.
Material variability & supply consistency	Fish by-product supply depends on fishing yields.
Certifications & global standards	Need to align with sustainable leather, trade, export norms.

Note. This table outlines the primary operational and market challenges faced in expanding the Pili Luna / Vos Honduras initiative.

6. Implications for LATAM

Pili Luna does not approach communities directly. She works through international organizations, NGOs, local governments, and private companies (e.g., IDB, World Bank, BCIE, CAF, Regal Springs, INCAE, local municipalities) who hire her as a consultant to execute their community projects. She states the failure of large international projects is because they are run by people who don't understand local realities. This structure highlights the complexity of the roles that NGOs and large government organizations can play in the development of sustainable initiatives. Oftentimes, these large organizations have such complicated ecosystems that end up being insufficient and counter-productive in these top-down driven international projects. There is an overwhelming need to have funders supporting local experts as they understand community dynamics and are agile enough to navigate the changes and drive implementation.

Pili Luna has stated her most important skill is listening and integrating. As a result, she has seen the benefits of adapting her teaching methods, moving away from complex measurements, to accommodate illiterate communities so they can learn in a way that best works for them (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Hands-On Artisan Training in Fish Leather Treatment

Note. Pili Luna training artisans using hands-on, adaptive teaching methods on how to treat the fish skins. From How fish-skin sneakers could tip the scales for these women in Central America, by Hares, S., 2022, Mastercard (https://www.mastercard.com/news/perspectives/2022/empowering-women-entrepreneur-in-central-america/). Copyright 2022 by Mastercard. Reprinted with permission.

On a broader scale, Pili Luna's model could inspire replication; other brands in Latin America can follow suit and implement the same practice of turning region-specific waste into luxury goods. By converting waste to value, they will close material loops and further reduce the need for virgin leather or synthetic substitutes. Pili Luna represents a new archetype: the "Social Circular Enterprise," which prioritizes community integration as the core of its circular model.

This model also serves to decolonize sustainability; it is a powerful example of a solution born from a Latin American context, solving a local waste problem with local resources and for local social benefit, rather than simply importing foreign models. It embodies local identity, addresses environmental issues unique to coastal ecosystems, and uplifts artisan communities. Clothing styles, patterns, and weaving techniques are often tied to specific ethnic groups, regions, and even villages (e.g., huipiles in Guatemala or ponchos in the Andes). Each piece tells a story: designs may reflect cosmology, history, social status, or spiritual beliefs. Wearing traditional clothing is a way of asserting cultural pride in the face of ongoing marginalization.

The decolonization of fashion in Latin America is not merely a critique of past injustices, but an active movement led by Indigenous designers and artisans who are reclaiming control over their creative and economic narratives. No longer willing to be relegated to the margins as laborers or sources of inspiration for external designers, Indigenous communities are positioning themselves at the forefront of the fashion industry by not only preserving their cultural heritage but also redefining it in ways that align with their own aspirations and identities. (Srinidhi, 2025).

7. Conclusion

Artisanal fashion in Latin America is about more than clothing; it is a dynamic expression of culture, community, resilience, and economic survival. The Pili Luna case study clearly illustrates that the path to a sustainable fashion industry runs directly through these communities.

The success of the Ocean Leather project is not just measured in square feet of leather produced, but in the resilient network of skilled women it has built. It proves that the most compelling circular models are those that close loops not just on materials, but on opportunity and dignity. By turning a waste into a premium product, Pili Luna challenges the very definition of waste and luxury.

The lesson for brands, policymakers, and consumers is clear: the future of fashion depends on supporting authentic, community-rooted makers. It requires valuing the story behind a product as much as its aesthetic and investing in circular models that prioritize people and planet alongside profit.

The final word belongs to Pili Luna herself, whose philosophy encapsulates the entire endeavor: “Cuando le pones corazón a las cosas, se logran… saber escuchar, antes que nada, cuáles son las necesidades reales” (P. Luna, personal communication, August 20, 2025). [She explained that this means,] “When you put your heart into things, they are achieved... knowing how to listen, first and foremost, to what the real needs are.” (Hecho por Nosotros, 2025).

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