



## The Social Entrepreneur of the Year in France



**Pierre Duponchel**

**Le Relais**

Founded in 1984, France

[www.le-relais.net](http://www.le-relais.net)

**Through the collection of second-hand textiles, Le Relais creates jobs in France and Africa for people that have been excluded from society.**

**Focus:** Professional Integration, Environment

**Geographic Area of Impact:** France, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Madagascar

**Model:** Social Business

### Background

Access to finding a stable job has become a real challenge, particularly in former industrial regions of France. The increasing rate of unemployment and its social consequences are also a big social and economic challenge for the country. Increasingly, many youth and those excluded from society have little to no chance of finding a job. For more than 25 years, Pierre Duponchel, through his social enterprise, has been creating jobs for the disenfranchised in France and Africa.

### Innovation and Activities

Le Relais collects, sorts and resells or recycles second-hand textiles, employing socially excluded people. The company has created 1,500 jobs in France and Africa. Facing the difficulties met by employees in finding a new job, Le Relais has been developing since 1993 activities that provide both training and sustainable employment. Pierre Duponche is focused on making Le Relais become an *Entreprise à But Socio-Economique* (a company with a socio-economic objective).

From a small door-to-door collection activity in the north of France, Le Relais has today become a major industry, treating more than 60,000 tons of textiles each year. The textiles collected are used for different purposes: top quality material is resold in Ding-Bring boutiques, an integrated network of second-hand shops; and approximately 40% are exported to Africa, where they are sorted again and resold on local markets. Textiles that cannot be resold are recycled into industrial rags. Le Relais is also committed to recycling textile and paper waste, reusing more than 85% of the 60,000 tons of textiles collected every year.

To remain viable and to create value from the collected textiles, Le Relais has developed innovative products from this raw material. The company, for example, has developed Metisse, a heat and sound isolating material based on recycled textile fibres from jeans and cotton. This licensed eco-material has had great success in environment-friendly construction projects.

After a television programme dedicated to its initiatives, the company receives multiple requests to duplicate the model throughout France. It has more recently developed activities in Africa.

### The Entrepreneur

Early on, Pierre Duponchel got involved in helping socially excluded people by taking part during his studies in social projects dedicated to underclass youth. He began a career as a manufacturing engineer in the food processing industry. Duponchel is also involved in France's Emmaus community, which enables people to move on from homelessness, providing work and a home in a supportive, family environment.