

Transparency is the supplier's goal

Lucy Reiter looks at the organisations set up to keep the industry clean and sparkling

Diamonds have been short of good publicity of late.

Demonstrations against the alleged eviction of Bushmen in Botswana to make way for mining, as well as the US rapper Kanye West's top-selling single "Diamonds from Sierra Leone", which highlights the scourge of blood diamonds, have given the ethical consumer reason to think twice.

Nowadays, with more people concerned about the origin of the products they buy, it is vital the jewellery industry offers a solution.

The Kimberley Process, an international scheme launched in 2003, has gone some way to addressing the issues by certifying conflict-free diamonds.

However, Tom Fyans, economic relations manager at Amnesty International UK, explains that while the Kimberley Process has had a positive effect, it needs bolstering. "The system is only as strong as its weakest link and there are areas allowing conflict diamonds to enter the chain," he says.

The Kimberley Process signed the industry up to a voluntary system of warranties to ensure diamonds are tracked right up to the point of sale. But there is now con-

cern that retailers are failing to self-regulate.

Amnesty and Global Witness have launched a guide for consumers that suggests questions to ask when buying diamonds such as requesting written conflict-free guarantees.

"It's important that consumers don't give up on the issue. They need to put pressure on the retailer," says Harrison Mitchell, a Global Witness campaigner.

According to the secretariat of the Kimberley Scheme, 99.8 per cent of global production of rough diamonds is sold via the Kimberley Process.

Regulating the broader picture will be the Council for Responsible Jewellery Practices (CRJP).

Set up in May 2005 to promote responsible practices throughout the diamond and gold industry, its 33 members include Cartier, Tiffany and Signet Group.

Chief executive Michael L Rae explains that once its practices are in place by early 2008, not only will it check whether members are following the Kimberley Process but its third-party monitoring will also ensure adherence to rules on other practices such as child

labour, working hours and environmental issues.

However, the CRJP is not without its critics. Greg Valerio, owner of jewellery retailer Cred, explains: "The CRJP will be good for the big players, but it will do very little for the small scale miners – particularly in Africa – or independent retailers, which make up 80 per cent of the industry.

"The reality is that the likelihood of a consumer buying a diamond that is fuelling civil war is almost negligible. However, the chances that social and environmental exploitation are involved is quite high."

Addressing the challenges facing the small-scale diamond mining sector is the Diamond Development Initiative (DDI), which aims to improve the working conditions and remuneration of miners.

Individual companies are also taking the initiative. One of the founding members of the CRJP, Rio Tinto Diamonds, last week launched its Select Diamantaire Mark.

The company is part of the Rio Tinto Group, a leading mining company, and produces 17 per cent of the world's rough diamonds.

The Mark, which is available for use by its customers for branding or marketing campaigns, confirms that the diamond has been mined from one of its three mines where there are regulated health, safety, environmental and social standards.

Marketing diamonds by mine of origin is a new concept and a step closer to total transparency.

Cred is already selling certified fair trade gold and platinum wedding bands, which it produces via partnerships with small-scale mining communities and cutting and polishing cooperative workshops.

"We want to launch a pilot project for getting fair trade cut and polished stones to market," says Mr Valerio.

"It means that there would be complete traceability that exceeds the transparency currently available under the Kimberley protocols, and the miners would get a larger cut of the cake."

Predicting a time span of five years, Mr Valerio is adamant it can work: "It isn't a question of if it will happen, but when," he says. "The consumer wants fair trade diamonds and it is something the industry needs."