



SUCCESS STORY

Coop Attracts Tourists, Boosts Profits

Business-savvy coop transforms women's lives and livelihood



Photo: M. Hedrick

Members of the women's cooperative proudly pose with their new, more profitable line of products.

“With the coop, I feel my life is full. I feel it's given me some direction,” said Aïcha Boumhati, the coop's president.

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Known as Morocco's liquid gold, argan oil is a prized commodity for Berber tribes. Increasingly coveted by Parisian chefs, the aromatic oil is used as a seasoning and is said to have medicinal properties. The oil is extracted from the almond-shaped seed kernel of the argan, a fruit that resembles a peach, through an arduous process involving intense manual labor.

The people of Tazarine live from the sale of argan oil, traditionally harvested by Berber women. In 2002, USAID helped a group of women establish a cooperative that changed their lives. USAID first provided financing to help the coop build a facility and purchase modern machinery for oil extraction. USAID then saw an opportunity to use the oil as a magnet for tourists in Morocco's southern region. But there was much to be done if the cooperative wanted to entice tourists. First, the oil was packaged in used water bottles. Second, the coop was virtually invisible from the road. Third, prospective buyers had little information about the product.

USAID first helped to diversify the produce line and purchase attractive, cost-effective containers for different oils. Then, USAID installed a sign directing passers-by to the coop along the main road. The coop's location in the highly-visited Agadir region made it an ideal tourist spot. Finally, the coop built a large display explaining the extraction process and daily life in the coop. An area map informs visitors about nearby attractions.

Their argan oil now commands a higher selling price and a larger clientele. With more business and with new bottles and labels, the coop now sells one liter of culinary oil for \$43, up from \$18. The cosmetic oil, a brand new product, sells for \$65 per liter.

The coop's success has empowered its 44 members, giving them confidence to plan for the future. “With the coop, I feel my life is full,” said its president Aïcha Boumhati. “I feel it's given me some direction.”