

Women's Cooperatives in Lebanon empowered by the sweet taste of success

After the July 2006 war severely damaged Lebanon's socio-economic and infrastructure, the establishment of income-generating projects in highly war-affected areas, especially projects targeting women was crucial to support the infrastructural and agricultural services and cooperatives.

By supporting local production initiatives, maintaining the processing of traditional food by small agricultural cooperatives, and offering vocational and skills training for women, UNDP has supported the establishment of numerous women cooperatives to respond to a deepening post-war economic crisis and the impact it has on rural communities and gender roles.

UNDP supported different women's cooperatives through the provision of equipment and machinery to develop and increase their specific and distinct specialties. In addition to machinery, some cooperatives receive vehicles for transportation of raw material and market distribution purposes as well as site and building expansions and modifications. The numerous women's cooperatives practice different crafts, from jewelry, textiles and artisanship to the production of traditional rural food items.



Zeinab Sader, an employee at a jewelry beading and textile workshop in Nabatieh explains that "nobody really knew how to make jewelry but we received adequate training and have now discovered hidden talents that actually serve to the women of Nabatieh and greater Lebanon's tastes." The women benefiting from these projects, irrespective of their village location or characteristics, agree that the impact goes beyond the monetarily measurable: "UNDP was here when we were down and pessimistic, encouraging us and giving us advice along the way", explains Salwa Ismail Bazzi, President of the Bint Jbeil Souk Women's Cooperative.

UNDP also provided the funding for the Bint Jbeil Municipality to ensure the management of rehabilitation of the markets and service infrastructural reconstruction. It offered technical mechanics such as an olive press and small back-room laboratory, drying shelves for efficiently drying herbs and grape leaves, and allowed the cooperative to move from a more remote area to the Souks, making them more accessible and frequented.



The village of Halloussiyeh has a remarkable market for their unique ketchup recipe made with pomegranate molasses as a substitute for sugar. Their produce is distributed to local agro-food stores, Souk El Tayeb, and even all the way to England. Aside their renowned ketchup, they also process olive oil, pickled vegetables and tomatoes, and an assortment of watermelon, apricot, and date marmalades. Hussein Sarhan, the former president of the cooperative explains that “Thanks to UNDP who provided the new machinery, we can avoid the hazards of working manually, whilst making larger quantities of ketchup in less time and required effort.” Already thinking ahead, their future plans include farming their own entirely organic produce to use for their final products. This will allow the cooperative to be entirely self-sufficient and immune to fluctuating market prices and seasonal variations.



On the borders of Hermel-Kwekh in the Bekaa region, “Al Sindyan” Women’s Association site was built entirely by UNDP, equipped with the necessary machinery, common meeting areas and storage space. Maintained by 20 women, it produces a wide array of organic products ranging from olive oil, hommos, capers and pickled vegetables to pomegranate molasses, jams and honey. Khadijah Shehine, the President of “Al Sindyan” recounts that “UNDP helped expand the site both physically in its location and more conceptually in the elevated societal roles of women.”

Nasri El Hiqk, head of the municipality of Hermel, speaks about the upturn after the 2006 war devastated the region: “UNDP efforts were immediately directed to the region. They could not have overcome many of the social and economic barriers they did without UNDP’s help.”

Comparatively, the South’s Deir Kanoun Ras El Ein’s Women’s Cooperative that started in 1998 by 12 women and today employs 23, processed small-scale nutritive and healthy jams, marmalades, and jellies for their own families and local communities. Unfortunately, the 2006 war set the

cooperative back tremendously. Empowered by the sweet taste of success, the motivated women took control under the active and charismatic leadership of Da'ad Ismail, the President of the cooperative. Ismail explains that this opportunity boosted the women's self-confidence and helped in their empowerment socially and morally.

Eventually, their specialty became "Mallet El Smeed," a type of delicious sesame bread resembling a cracker-type man'ouche which has enjoyed enormous success all over Lebanon and is always in high demand. The much-needed equipment and machinery UNDP installed such as the dough-mixer, cutter, oven, generator, and transport vehicle has served to decrease production time tremendously and increase revenue by 50%, granting the cooperative the opportunity to participate in exhibitions to market the increasingly popular produce. Ismail affirms "UNDP was the white hand that helped make extremely difficult working conditions much easier for us to thrive in."



Despite old norms and traditions restricting women to the mere acceptance of a patriarchal society, women throughout even the most remote parts of Lebanon have found a medium to assert their rights and challenge the status quo. Zeinab Shamseddine from Arabsalim is a prime example of this phenomenon. She completed a UNDP-funded vocational training session for mechanics and cell phone repair as the only woman in the course among 30 men and a male professor. "I was driven and motivated to ignore the strange feeling of being the only girl there...I was shy at first but nothing mattered; I just wanted to realize my goals." Since the completion of her training, her income has almost tripled and she runs her own cell phone repair unit in a toy, cellular and accessories store.

What is more, however, the women beneficiaries as well as the greater community are overcome with a newfound self-confidence and empowerment that hastens their moral, social, economic and political emancipation. They are able to voice their demands for equality with more ease and a louder bark, especially considering their elevated roles as job-holders in cooperatives. For guaranteed continued success in the development of women's roles, the bottom-up grassroots approach for local development employed by UNDP has been fool-proof; it is crucial to strengthen women's gender roles while still incorporating the local community, not just the municipalities, for a true sense of identity and belonging.