

Small Business Development with the Cooperative des Tisseuses d'Ain Leuh

Advocacy Project Fellowship in Ain Leuh, Morocco

Despite King Mohammed VI's efforts to further economic growth and development throughout Morocco, most employment opportunities are located in the Atlantic coastal region in urban centers. The rural poor are still largely excluded from access to healthcare, education and the steady improvement of the country's infrastructure. Women in rural communities are especially vulnerable to living in poverty as men migrate to urban areas seeking employment. The women of Ain Leuh are creating a new economic reality by establishing a business cooperative in their community.

The women of the Cooperative des Tisseuses d'Ain Leuh create handmade woven textiles in traditional Amazigh (Berber) patterns for sale from their storefront in Ain Leuh and online from their website. The cooperative's website allows these artisans to offer their handicrafts directly to the global market while not having to rely on a costly middleman.

The cooperative is located in the village of Ain Leuh in the Middle Atlas region of Morocco and is relatively removed from the country's main tourist routes. The majority of Ain Leuh's 6,000 inhabitants identify as Amazigh, the indigenous ethnic group of North Africa.

The cooperative's website, available at <http://ainleuhcooperative.webs.com/> was established through a partnership with PeaceCorp volunteers and provides a platform where English-speaking customers worldwide may browse photos of weavings and purchase from the cooperative's inventory. The website is fully maintained and operated by women of the cooperative.

My role this summer as a fellow with the Advocacy Project is twofold. First, since this will be the first summer the Advocacy Project will have a fellow based at Ain Leuh, I will work toward creating relationships with the women of the cooperative, understanding the structure and processes of their work, as well as assess areas of opportunity where future fellows through the Advocacy Project can contribute to the continued growth of the cooperative.

Secondly, I hope to help the women of the cooperative tell their story and promote their business, not only through my own blog posts and social media tools, but also through the creation of an Advocacy Quilt. The Advocacy Project will be displaying quilts at the UN Headquarters on International Women's Day of 2012. In the past, over 80,000 people have viewed AP's exhibitions. It is my hope that each woman of the cooperative will agree to contribute a small weaving to create a larger whole promoting not only their business and indigenous craft, but also their culture as Amazigh Moroccan women.