

The Advocacy Project: Cooperative des Tisseuses d'Ain Leuh, Morocco

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First Report

About the Cooperative

The Cooperative des Tisseuses d'Ain Leuh produce high quality flat weavings (*hanbel*), woven tapestries (*diraza*) and other items made from their woven products, such as belts, Moroccan slippers (*bagela*) and bags. Twenty to 30 women are involved in the cooperative to varying degrees, and work out of a three-room complex near the center of town. The cooperative has done well promoting their business in the local market thanks to their own networking as well as the presence of the Peace Corps in the traditional handicrafts sector. In the past year, the cooperative has traveled to Rabat, Fez and Marrakech to participate in local craft fairs, has set up booths at two festivals in Ain Leuh and one in a neighboring town, and will occasionally travel to Azrou to sell their pieces at an artisan market.

The cooperative's profits from local sales are not large, however, and although they have an established website, it has not generated any sales this year. The small scale of sales has caused a lack of interest in the art of traditional weaving within the younger generation. Many of the daughters of the cooperative's women have entered the workforce as hairdressers and tailors, preferring this type of work to the high labor, low profit of weaving. Unfortunately, the Peace Corp will no longer be involved in the traditional handicraft sector beginning in 2013. The cooperative will therefore have to adjust to not having a Peace Corp volunteer partner or the regional handicraft fairs that they put on.

If the cooperative cannot attract new artists and find a larger market for their textiles, more than just the families of the women involved in the cooperative will feel the impact. The work of the cooperative benefits the entire Ain Leuh community directly. Shepherds sell their wool to the cooperative, the cooperative hires women who can only work out of their homes to wash and spin the wool into yarn, and seasonal workers are paid to collect plant matter used to dye the yarn. In addition to perpetuating a traditional art form of the indigenous Amazigh people, the cooperative provides work to a community that would otherwise rely primarily on the cherry and apple crop.

The Cooperative's Goals

The goal of the cooperative is to increase their yearly number of sales. Because of the high demand for quality handmade goods from the United States and other countries abroad most of the increased orders will come from online sales. Concretely, in 2013 the cooperative hopes to process and complete at least one online order a month.

With the extra income earned from these twelve sales (the average cost of one *hanbel* is around \$250) the cooperative will purchase five new stainless steel pots for dying wool and the specialized burner required for heating the dying solution. The pots run at approximately 1500MAD (\$200) per pot and must be purchased in Meknes. A car would have to be hired to transport the pots back to Ain Leuh. A long-term goal is to eventually fix the leaking plumbing pipes in the lower workroom where the *diraza* are made.

My Role in Achieving These Goals

My role this summer with the cooperative is twofold. Firstly, I will begin the work required to facilitate online purchases. This is a challenging task, and it will probably take more than two months to create a smooth, sustainable process. However, to begin this task, I will update the existing website and work with members of the cooperative to create an intuitive order form that will be filled out by the online purchaser and understood by the women. I also hope to create a number of templates in English that can be cut and pasted into the body of an email with only general fields that need to be filled out.

In order for this system to be sustainable, however, at least one member must be comfortable using email. My goal is to sit down for one hour with at least one member of the cooperative at the local cyber cafe once a week to gain familiarity with the computer, their email account, and their website.

Secondly, I will work to generate interest in the cooperative's work. My personal blog posts, profiles of involved women, flickr and Facebook pages will not only showcase the women's work but explain the setting, context and importance of the cooperative. The cooperative has expressed a desire for a video outlining the process of their work, which can be distributed to customers who visit their storefront and posted online. I've started collecting footage of the town and the cooperative and hope to complete the short video by the end of the summer.

This is the first summer that the Advocacy Project has partnered with the Cooperative des Tisseuses d'Ain Leuh in Morocco. I have been in Ain Leuh now for two weeks and have already learned a great deal about how a cooperative in Morocco is formed and functions, the role of the various women within the organization, and how they wish to grow as a business. It is my hope that the cooperative and The Advocacy Project can continue their partnership through additional Peace Fellowships in the future.