

FAIR TRADE FOR WOMEN PRODUCERS

Mexico

"I never thought that we women could move forward. Thank you for showing us the film with the experiences from other countries. I can see that in other countries they have grown a lot. We are not going to stay where we are; in the years ahead we will grow. We have machines, we can practice, train more people, have more work, sell more."

Agustina, El Alberto, Workshop, March, 2011

Partner: Ya munts'í b'ehña, SC de RL de CV, a Cooperative of Indigenous Women Artisans, and their support organization Ñepi Behña, A. C.

MISSION & MEMBERSHIP

Ya munts'í b'ehña means "women united" in the ñähñú language. The cooperative is located in the Mezquital Valley in the State of Hidalgo, which has a population of 2 million people, 15.2 per cent of whom speak an indigenous language as their first language. The cooperative, which was formally registered in 2000, is composed of 250 women members from five communities.

The women members of the cooperative produce body scrubs made from the fibre of the maguey cactus plant

LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONNECTIONS & MARKETS

Members of the cooperative have been selling scrubs to The Body Shop International since the early 1990s through a relationship established by that company's founder, Anita Roddick, under its Community Fair Trade Programme. Since its legal registration in 2001, the cooperative has been the direct exporter to The Body Shop.

In 2006 The Body Shop was sold to cosmetics giant L'Oréal. The L'Oréal Foundation in Mexico has been funding the cooperative to develop a livelihoods diversification programme for the last two years with a particular emphasis on environmental protection. The women have been supported to purchase chickens and sheep, produce organic fertilizers and grow



Photo: Ya munts'í b'ehña

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Launched in 2009, the Women's Economic Empowerment project is funded by the MDG3 Global Fund by the Government of the Netherlands. Through the project, WIEGO and its partners are advocating for the needs of informal workers, especially women. The project seeks to promote the voice, visibility and validity of working poor women across different countries, sectors and issues in the informal economy. As part of this project, WIEGO's Global Trade Programme, in partnership with leading Fair Trade organizations in seven countries, initiated *Fair Trade for Women Producers* with a focus on documenting, analyzing and disseminating key success factors of fair trade by involving women producers in all stages of development.



Development Cooperation
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vegetable gardens, construct water storage tanks and improved wood-burning stoves.

CURRENT CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

Many of the women in the cooperative are female heads of household. Mass migration to the United States since the 1980s left many of the rural communities with a predominantly female population. During the 1990s, remittances from those living in the USA were reported to be the second most important source of income to Mexico after oil. Now, because of the global economic crisis, the remittances have dried up and many of the women and their families are wholly dependent on the money from the sales of scrubs.

During the project, the cooperative identified two key challenges: one is the dependency on a single key buyer; the other is how to ensure rotation of leadership roles from a relatively small pool of members who are willing to run for election. Many of the women have had limited schooling and there are low levels of literacy.

FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

The women members of the cooperative have benefited from long-term support through educational workshops and leadership development from their support organization, which they have largely funded themselves from the proceeds of their sales income.

Before the creation of the cooperative, the women would sell their scrubs to sub-contractors or directly in the local market place. Traders would withhold pay for months and pay low prices. The producers did not know who their final buyer was nor the final selling price. This negative experience led the women to create a governance structure which consists of a number of elected "committees" to oversee the operations of the cooperative.

Strict record-keeping ensures that there is full traceability on how many scrubs are produced by each member to avoid sub-contracting of production and payment of fair prices. Packing and dispatch work is overseen by a committee that ensures that work is rotated and properly compensated. The cooperative has built its assets with the building of its own centre with offices, warehousing and meeting space.

The women members of the cooperatives reported that the Fair Trade for Women Producers project had created visibility that could lead to an appreciation of the value of their contribution at a personal, relationship, community and collective level.

MOVING FORWARD

The cooperative has identified the need to ensure that the membership receives regular capacity building, especially between election periods to develop new leadership candidates.

The cooperative has also made some progress in diversifying markets through the development of its own Brand "Corazon Verde" (Green Heart) in cooperation with Ñepi Behña, which provides product design and marketing expertise. This has also allowed the cooperative to network with other producer groups to develop the local market in Mexico.

With the significant reduction in household incomes and the local economy brought by the global economic crisis, being organized in a formally registered cooperative is more important than ever. It has enabled these women workers to build a direct link with a niche export market, have their own bank accounts and travel outside of their communities – things they say were once beyond their wildest dreams.



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy by increasing their representative Voice through more and stronger organizations and their official Visibility through better statistics and research. The individuals and institutions in the WIEGO network are drawn from three broad constituencies: membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers; research, statistical, and academic institutions; and development agencies of various types (non-governmental, governmental, and inter-governmental). For more information see <http://www.wiego.org>