



WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: SUPPORTING WOMEN- LED BUSINESS

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Women's economic empowerment is not solely about economic growth. Achieving meaningful economic empowerment requires transformative and systemic change for women across social, political and economic domains. Oxfam in OPT supports the development of small and medium-sized enterprises to increase their processing capacity and profit. This includes skills training, material support, improving access to markets and facilitating links with networks, including the private sector. This case study documents learning from two of the SMEs supported by Oxfam: Al-Thuraya, a small-scale private enterprise and Qabalan, a traditional women's cooperative, both located in the West Bank.

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This case study was written by Nabila El-Ahmed and Nada Nabris. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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Cover photo: Thuraya's daughter filling the boxes of the final production of the lemon concentrated syrup. © Suhaib Jarrar /Oxfam OPTI.

Back page photo: Thuraya using a delicate device to measure the density of sugar in the syrup. © Suhaib Jarrar /Oxfam OPTI.

1 INTRODUCTION

Oxfam in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) implements the vision of Oxfam 2020 of putting women at the heart of all we do, and as such we mainstream Gender Justice in all our work in addition to implementing a standalone Gender Justice Programme. The Economic Justice Programme works to achieve women's economic empowerment in all its projects. Women's economic empowerment is not solely about economic growth. Achieving meaningful economic empowerment requires transformative and systemic change for women across social, political and economic domains, namely: decision making; control over assets; the ability to maintain a living wage; active participation in enterprise; living free from violence; and systemic change across social, economic and political systems.¹

Oxfam in OPT supports the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to increase their processing capacity and profit. This includes skills training, material support, improving access to markets and facilitating links with networks, including the private sector. To date, Oxfam has supported 17 women-led businesses through our Economic Justice Programme, in partnership with the Rural Women Development Society (RWDS) and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Australian Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreement (AMENCA).

Achieving meaningful economic empowerment requires transformative and systemic change for women across social, political and economic domains.

This case study documents learning from two of the SMEs supported by Oxfam: Al-Thuraya, a small-scale private enterprise and Qabalan, a traditional women's cooperative, both located in the West Bank. These examples were chosen because they demonstrate two different models of enterprise, while illustrating the resilience of women entrepreneurs, the common challenges facing SMEs, and opportunities for growth.

A TALE OF TWO ENTERPRISES

Al-Thuraya Company is a small enterprise which was established by Thuraya, a 32-year-old mother of eight. Thuraya's journey towards entrepreneurship began in 2010, when she received funding to start a Carob molasses cooperative. However, after six years the cooperative dissolved due to competition, lack of revenue and insufficient commitment of members. Instead of weakening Thuraya's resolve, this setback made her even more determined to succeed. She took advantage of an opportunity with a local NGO to learn how to produce concentrated lemon juice. Thuraya started to produce juice in small batches and slowly built a business, which she registered as Al-Thuraya Inc in 2017.

The company is made up of four shareholders: Thuraya, two other women and a private sector investor, who is also the distributor. The relationship with the investor/distributor is mutually beneficial: from the investor's perspective, Al-Thuraya is well established and has strong potential. The company gains both a financial investor with capital and a

distributor who has additional incentives and commitment to market the products.

In the past year, Oxfam supported the company's expansion by providing a project grant towards a multi-product machine (to which Thuraya contributed more than 35% of the cost). This has enabled Al-Thuraya to increase its production of concentrated juice from 480 bottles to 7,200 bottles per year, and to introduce two new varieties of juice. Thuraya now plans to further expand the business by adding more varieties and products, such as frozen lemon cubes, and improving the quality and cost-efficiency of production practices. The business currently operates out of a small rented unit that houses the machine. Thuraya opened a mini-market in an adjacent unit; this will help increase income so more funds can be invested back into the company. When asked what she needed most to grow her business, Thuraya didn't hesitate to reply: better marketing and technical skills. She has been actively looking for training opportunities to improve the company's expertise.

In spite of facing many personal challenges in her life (see video of Thuraya's story in the blog²), Thuraya is determined to forge ahead.

'Giving up and failure is not an option for me.'

Thuraya

Thuraya exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit and has already successfully navigated her way through many social and economic obstacles to grow her business. However, to sustain this success she needs further support, including marketing, distribution and technical training. Oxfam and its partners can do more to facilitate the relationship between emerging small-scale producers, such as Thuraya, and the private sector.

Qabalan Women's Cooperative is a traditional women's cooperative with 42 members, producing *somasa* dough. Oxfam has supported Qabalan to increase its processing capacity and profitability. This included providing machinery such as a cutting machine, scales, electric oven, stainless steel table and vacuum-packing machine, and funding promotional materials. While Qabalan operates under a different model to Al-Thuraya, it faces many similar challenges. In the past year, these related to poor distribution, marketing, quality control and competition from a cheaper imported product. Some of the problems resulted from a weak relationship with the distributor who was not invested in the cooperative, and therefore was not as committed to marketing the product with local retailers and ensuring that products were properly stored to preserve their quality. These factors, combined with high running costs, meant the cooperative was not able to pay out any revenue to its members. To address these issues, cooperative members are now taking on part of the distribution themselves.

On Oxfam's recommendation, Qabalan is working to attain food health certification. To achieve this, it needs refrigeration equipment and expertise. The cooperative successfully applied to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for a refrigerator drawer, which will enable members to store produce for longer and widen their distribution network. Members will also receive training in 'shock freezing' for quality control, which will allow them to transport the frozen products in any

vehicle. To address the high running costs, cooperative members (41 of whom are employees) have agreed to not take wages and only receive their share of revenues. According to the director of Qabalan, their new strategy will enable the cooperative to cut production costs, which will translate into a more competitive price for the product.

Both of the examples above show women entrepreneurs who are determined to succeed. Despite their hard work, and the fact that both enterprises have received support from Oxfam in their development, their future success is not guaranteed. Both face common challenges and expertise gaps, particularly in access to markets, distribution, quality control and technical skills.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We learned that there is great potential, but better support mechanisms are needed to address the specific needs of each enterprise. Both examples present women entrepreneurs who are adaptable and demonstrate good business acumen and strategic thinking. The question to ask at this stage is: how can we better foster existing women's small-scale enterprises to ensure their growth and sustainability?

The most significant piece of learning from these examples is that women entrepreneurs themselves can best identify the types of support they need to grow their business. They are fully aware of the gaps, and understand how these can be addressed. This case study revealed that women entrepreneurs need material and technical support, and that this support has to be accompanied by connections to the market and strategies to scale up their enterprises.

Another important learning that emerged is the need to further study how private sector investment in women's cooperatives and women-led businesses can be encouraged and strengthened, and to identify the factors that help or hinder private sector investment. More focus should be placed on the role that the private sector can play in promoting and marketing products from women-led businesses.

After providing initial support Oxfam and its partners need to accompany women cooperatives/businesses on their journey to greater profitability – by continuing to assess progress, facilitating market linkages and access to new markets, and monitoring how others are attracted and responding to the business idea. To ensure systemic change, the support needs to also be provided in conjunction with efforts to empower women in social and political spheres and raise awareness on the importance of gender equity.

'We don't only provide members with job opportunities; we also work on increasing women's self-confidence and providing them with other experiences and skills training.'

Nadia, President of Qabalan Women's Cooperative

RECOMMENDATIONS

Examining these two cases allowed us to better understand the strengths of small-scale women-led enterprises and the common challenges they face. The following are key recommendations for future programmatic development:

- Support training in marketing skills and facilitate linkages with marketing networks and the private sector. This could be achieved, for example, by establishing a permanent local market to showcase local women's produce.
- Provide training to improve product quality and standardization – including packaging and labelling.
- Research: conduct in-depth analysis on how to encourage and strengthen private sector investment in women-led businesses.
- Promote and support unique products, to enable enterprises to be more competitive in the market, as in the examples of Al-Thuraya and Qabalan.
- Carry out more advocacy and policy initiatives to protect local products from competition from cheaper imported goods.
- To ensure systemic change, Oxfam and its partners need to provide follow-up support to women cooperatives/businesses – to assess progress, facilitate market linkages and access to new markets, and to monitor how others are attracted to the idea.
- Deliver gender awareness campaigns that target the private sector, retailers and consumers to increase their understanding of the importance of the role of local women producers in the economy.

NOTES

1 Oxfam. (2017). Oxfam's Conceptual Framework on Women's Economic Empowerment <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/oxfams-conceptual-framework-on-womens-economic-empowerment-620269>

2 Oxfam (2019)/. Making Markets Work in Fragile Settings <https://views-voices.oxfam.org.uk/2019/01/market-system-development-OPT>



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