Releasing potential to boost sales

Women food cooperatives in the region of Bekaa produce high quality natural foods. Despite good manufacturing facilities and excellent products, marketing and sales continue to be a challenge. Two UN corporate/private sector Volunteers from Kraft Foods helped the cooperatives find ways to boost sales.

Women food cooperatives in the Lebanese region of Bekaa produce high quality natural jams, pickles, juice, and other Lebanese delights. While they have good manufacturing facilities and excellent products, marketing and sales continue to be a challenge. As part of UNV’s Corporate/Private Sector programme, two experts from Kraft Foods went on a volunteer assignment to Lebanon to assist the cooperatives in boosting sales.

"The best men in Lebanon are the women" were the provocative words used by the male owner of one of Bekaa Valley’s most successful wineries to explain that it is predominantly women in the region who are responsible for putting Bekaa on the regional and international culinary map.
While these women persevere through economically troubled and politically uncertain times, selling their produce to their local communities and a reduced number of overseas markets, they all share a common frustration: access to larger consumer markets has proved difficult so far.

In order to boost the growth of the women cooperatives, local field experts working under ART GOLD Lebanon, a UNDP programme focusing on decentralized cooperation and local governance, decided to tap into the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme’s Corporate/Private Sector (CPS) scheme.

As part of UNV’s CPS programme, which aims to provide technical expertise to developing countries whilst promoting volunteerism, two experts from Kraft Foods went on a volunteer assignment to Lebanon in May 2011 to assist the cooperatives in increasing their efficiency and boosting sales. Susan Spanitz, working for Kraft Australia, is a Senior Consumer Scientist specialized in sensory science and product testing, while Peter Whitney, from Kraft Argentina, has extensive expertise in marketing, market development and new channel distribution.

During their two-week assignment, they visited 15 women food processing cooperatives in the Bekaa valley, as well as other businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, and several successful small- and medium-sized enterprises in the region. The visits provided the volunteers with a better understanding of current obstacles faced by the cooperatives, and possible ways to boost their growth. The cooperatives differ in size, structure and operation, and they employ a total of around 200 women. Although some cooperatives distribute through Fair Trade (Terroirs du Liban) and Atayeb Alrif (Rural Delights), most of them only sell in local markets.

The two UN corporate/private sector Volunteers recommended creating a consortium of women cooperatives which can market their produce under a common brand, but still encompass the different local identities. One brand is ideal for marketing purposes, and will help position it as the leader in high quality natural products from the region, benefiting the cooperatives and the communities.

As Peter Whitney put it to the women, "Together you are stronger". On the last day of the volunteers’ assignment, representatives from all the women cooperatives were invited to a joint meeting in Zahle. Susan Spanitz and Peter Whitney presented their assessment of the situation, and received plenty of feedback from the audience. The women felt ownership of the project and were eager to discuss their potential and possible strategies to continue expanding production and increase sales.
Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals