

# Toudarte Cooperative

## COOP CARD\*

**Location:** Imsouane

**Year of foundation:** 2011

**N° of members:** 100

**Sector:** Women's agricultural cooperative

**Key themes:** Decent work, women's empowerment, ethical value chains



## CONTEXT

Imsouane is a rural village located in Agadir-Ilda Ou Tanane Prefecture, in the southwest of Morocco. The forest of argan trees surrounds the breathtaking landscapes in the region of Souss Massa. Beyond the beauty, the argan trees are of real value for the whole country. Argan oil, which is produced from the kernels of the tree, is evocatively referred to as liquid gold as it is the most expensive vegetable oil in the world. The argan tree is endemic to the semi-desert Souss Valley and grows nowhere else in the world, and Morocco exports worldwide 700 tons of argan oil every year. Amazigh women have been extracting argan oil for centuries. Today, more than 4,000 women organised in 300 cooperatives in the region live off producing and marketing argan oil, which has become a source of income for households.

Beyond the economic aspect, the argan forests play also a crucial role in protecting the Soussa plain from desertification, maintaining the ecological balance in the semi-arid Atlas region.

In this context, the cooperative movement involved in the argan oil extraction has stimulated the achievement of three important national strategic goals: the development of rural communities, the enhancement of economic resources, and the protection of the environment.

## AUTHORS

Sara Vicari, Andrea Mancori, Cécile Berranger, Giorgia Amato

\*Information collected during a fieldwork carried out in January 2019.

## COOP STORY

The Cooperative Toudarte, Toudarte in Amazigh meaning “life”, is a women’s cooperative set up in 2004 by a group of 15 women in Aksmou village, in Imsouane town.

Fatima Ihihi took the very first steps which led to the foundation of the cooperative. After completing her studies, Fatima came back to her village and launched a powerful project of women’s empowerment. Following the footsteps of her father, who found an association aimed at guaranteeing access to drinkable water and electricity after the drought of 1995, Fatima set up a women’s association to improve access to education for women and children. As soon as she started raising awareness among people about the importance of women’s education, she faced the reluctance of families as social norms were a major impediment to women’s empowerment. However, soon her efforts were rewarded: some women joined the association and they then founded a cooperative for the production of argan oil. At the beginning, the cooperative aimed to commercialise almonds, then women specialised in the extraction and production of argan oil. The success of the cooperative encouraged many women to participate. In 2007, the cooperative joined the “Economical Benefit Group Traganine”, a union of six cooperatives marketing argan oil and leveraging their negotiating power to obtain a fair price for products.

Today, Toudarte counts 100 members, exports high quality products globally and has found success in international markets. In addition, in order to be sustainable, the cooperative has diversified its production by starting new activities, such as poultry farming. The cooperative also provides members with key services, such as a kindergarten and shop located in the cooperative’s premises, easy access to zero-interest loans, and to healthcare.

## HOW HAS THE COOPERATIVE CHANGED WOMEN MEMBERS' LIVES?

**Education:** Members have the possibility to send their children to school, including girls, and they can now even attend university - mainly thanks to higher incomes;

**Basic needs:** Members have secure and adequate access to food, water and clothes for all the household members. This is not only due to their higher income, but also thanks to the cooperative shop that provides all they need at cheaper prices and flexible payment conditions;

**Wellbeing:** Members are healthier because of better working conditions and less taxing activities thanks to the introduction of machines;

**Caregiving support:** Members are more relaxed at work thanks to the creation of a kindergarten in the cooperative that looks after their children while they work;

**Healthcare:** Members have easy access to healthcare, including medical visits, surgeries and medicine, all provided for free by the cooperative to them and their families;

**Finance:** Members have saving opportunities and access to interest-free loans;

**Empowerment:** Members have benefitted from a massive increase in their self-confidence and self-esteem, also thanks to the literacy and training courses delivered by the cooperative;

**Self-realisation:** Members have the possibility to achieve their dreams and aspirations, for example going on pilgrimage to Mecca, perhaps the dream that all Muslims hope to achieve.

## SELECTED QUOTE

“Now, everything has changed. Not only for economical aims, but also social ones. The mentality has totally changed. Now women have self-confidence”

Fatima Ihihi, founder member of the Toudarte Cooperative



## KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Even in those areas characterised by social norms that hinder women’s empowerment, collective action when combined with the creation of exclusive women’s spaces can be the driver for massive social and cultural changes.
- Collective action leads to more than economic empowerment. Through active participation, women gain autonomy and improved self-esteem. The cooperative has also contributed to better working conditions and improved access to healthcare and education.
- Cooperatives are a key institution for inclusive and sustainable development of people and the environment. Cooperatives contribute to preserving natural resources while guaranteeing decent work for people.

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