

# LOCAL SKILLS MATTER



# Entrepreneurial Communities:

## Sparking change in communities in the ETF partner countries



**The Algerian Entrepreneurial Community is an illustration of experimental leadership, how a relatively recent local grass-roots partnership has been established, expanded, and sustained its activities without the involvement of local authorities. The partnership draws on local agricultural potential and is built on the collaborative advantage generated among five key actors:**

- Farmers association 'El Argoub' (lead)
- VET provider
- Agriculture Department
- Chamber of Agriculture
- Member of the Parliament

The Algerian Entrepreneurial Community is an informal partnership among farmers and breeders owning small properties in Laghouat. Its vision is to address the gap that exists between the potential for agriculture and jobs available in the area, and to provide the next generation of farmers with the practical skills, knowledge, technology, and background for readily exploitable and employable skills.

The push for the Entrepreneurial Community to be born came from the frustration felt by local farmers who sought to open up bottom-up channels of communication within the multi-level governance arrangements in Algeria. Starting with communication between the Entrepreneurial Community and the local government, the partnership has been able to have their views and contributions heard and acknowledged in making a case for the skills needed to support the socio-economic development of Laghouat.

The main activities of this fee-based membership organisation are to:

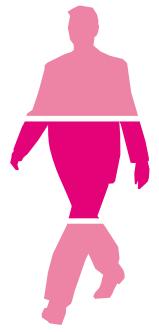
- Generate, train and apply knowledge of organic farming, efficiency, and sustainability in farming practices
- Facilitate two-way knowledge transfers between the next generation of farmers and experienced farmers
- Serve as an on-farm training facility to the local University where agronomy is being taught, to provide the young with practical skills, knowledge, technology, and background
- Establish a public-private partnership with the National Agency of Labour Protection in Laghouat (inventory and propagation of local plants)

The Algerian Entrepreneurial Community demonstrates the ability of grass-roots partnerships to bring together local actors in a meaningful and sustainable manner for the socio-economic development of a locality. In Laghouat the local authorities are yet to grasp the resulting opportunities to enhance vocational agricultural education.



**Project:**

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**The Algerian Entrepreneurial Community consists of a community of small farmers and breeders in Laghouat, a town on the border of Sahara. The partnership is centred around three key objectives: (i) working in groups to identify potential skills and inform and train fellow farmers to improve their performance; (ii) simplify farming theories and methods for illiterate farmers; (iii) motivate youth in daily tasks; and (iv) multiply contacts with other associations and groups of farmers to widen scope and exchange experiences.**

The district of Laghouat is in the centre of Algeria, just at the edge of the great Sahara desert. It has a long history of agricultural significance and is renowned as a city of intellectuals with a flourishing culture, acting as a bridge between the Sahara region and the north of the country. While agricultural labour is traditionally highly respected, the effect of Algeria's rapid shift to reliance on a hydrocarbon economy – that is, oil and gas extraction and export – has led to a shortage of young people willing to engage in manual, outdoor work.

As a result, the biggest challenge that farmers in the region now face is demographic. Most are over 50 years old, and are looking to a new generation to take over. However, it has become rare for young people to show an interest in farming as a career. The climatic conditions are hard, with very hot summers and cold winters. The tendency is for young people to look for relatively secure administrative jobs which are considered 'easy' in comparison to the physically demanding nature of farm work.

When farmer and social entrepreneur Mohammed Brik established the El Argoub farmers' association, attracting youth into farming was not the main focus. Starting with a group of around 40 neighbouring small-holders, the objectives were to bring farmers together to build a sense of community, share tips and techniques from their farming experience, and develop organic farming practices, particularly in the rehabilitation of palm tree husbandry. Brik owns an 8-hectare farm and promotes organic methods with the aim of deriving commercial results from sustainable farming. He recognizes that truly sustainable development in agriculture can only be achieved with organic farming, which requires a minimum level of respect for the environment – particularly in terms of pest control, genetically modified organisms and other environmentally damaging materials – and good management of water resources.

The commercial viability of these methods is crucial. "It is an entrepreneurial spirit that drives us, in the sense that we picked up pieces of land that are very hard to work, that needed a lot of money. The results reflect the effort we have made over a period of many years. Each farmer has developed his farm according to his financial capacities and his skills, and what is hard about the farming business is that the results of our efforts take a long time to appear."

### Farming incentives

As Omar Rahmani, Secretary General of the Agricultural Chamber of Laghouat, points out, a combination of hard work and relatively little return, especially in the short-term, is not likely to attract young people. His view is that incentives are needed are to address the problem. "Attracting them back to the sector requires a combination of training and financial support. For example, in honey production the state is supplying





100% of the set-up costs. It buys the bees, the beehives, the equipment; it buys everything and trains people to work on honey production. That's 100% benefit. In other areas it may not be 100%, perhaps only 30 or 40%, but the same principle applies."

The Agricultural Chamber provides a link between the members of the various farming groups and the local administration. The Chamber picks up on whatever activities or support the members of the association are looking for, and presents them to the administration to be implemented. The way the Chamber works means it needs to liaise with associations rather than with individuals. This was something that Mohammed Brik took into account from the start. "We had advice from somebody in the local authority who told us it's good to be part of a group instead of just acting as individuals. That was one of the reasons why we decided to create the association, to have a legal relationship with the administration. Now we can go to the administration as a legally-recognized association and talk, exchange ideas, make requests."

To influence national policy the association works with local MPs, and they enjoy the willing support of Laghouat's representative in the Algerian National People's Assembly, Boubakeur Gueddouda. "Mr Gueddouda offered his support right away," explains Mohammed Brik, "from the first time he met with us he understood what we are doing and supported our actions. He is our main asset when dealing with policy makers at local or national level. I doubt that policy makers at national level would listen to a farmers' association from down in the Sahara desert!"

In turn, Deputy Gueddouda recognizes the value that a network like the El Argoub farmers' association can create locally. "Mohammed Brik's association mobilizes and brings together farmers in a modern way. Policy up to now has been very centralized, without taking into account the specific characteristics or problems faced by different regions. As the deputy for this region I am very proud of what has been done. We have an opportunity to protect our heritage. There are many products that are disappearing. We can create programmes to protect them. Through the associations, we can have access to people with practical experience."

### **Better competition requires more cooperation**

Representatives of government, training providers, and business associations met at an ETF workshop on enterprise skills in Algiers. They discussed helping entrepreneurs turn micro-businesses into SMEs to drive growth, and agreed that competitiveness is enhanced by increasing cooperation between education and business.

**Source:** Developing Skills For SMEs: A Priority For Algeria, [etf.europa.eu](http://etf.europa.eu)



Government farming policy is broad and well-supported financially, but there is a widespread perception that bureaucracy imposes a heavy burden, and that farmers give up on valuable projects as a result. "In my opinion the government has set laws, regulations and procedures which are very good," Mohammed Brik says. "The problem is the implementation on the ground, at local level. What we are requesting is that national policy decisions should be applied at local level. We would like the government at national level to give students coming into the industry priority in land, in property, in electricity, in energy, in everything, so they can make farming profitable quickly."

### **Growing easier**

El Argoub is proposing that when a young farmer is involved in a project they should receive exemptions from some of the paperwork, and access to government support should be made as quick and easy as possible. This would help to attract students in agronomy who have already acquired the theoretical knowledge about farming at university. Strengthening the relationship with vocational education provision is a central element in El Argoub's programme. At the main VET provider, the University of Laghouat, a bachelor's degree in agriculture takes three years, and approximately 60 to 70% of graduates go on to work in agriculture. Coming mostly from around the region they tend to have some connection with agriculture, either through a general interest or through a family connection.

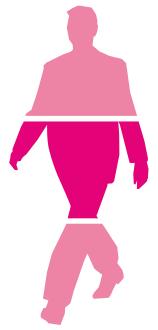
Adel Moulai, head of the University of Laghouat's Agronomy Department, is keen to maintain links with social partners. "These links are really beneficial. They allow us to keep abreast of agricultural problems in the region, they give our students the opportunity to experience work on the land and they enable us to adjust our training to the realities of the current agricultural situation." He is aware of the demographic challenge that the members of the association face. "It's true that some other industries are more appealing. More recently though we have seen more young people turning to agriculture, especially where projects funded by the state are involved. There has been more investment in programmes for young people and now there is more demand."



### **Traditions new and old**

The combination of capturing traditional knowledge through informal learning, pursuing active relationships with education providers, and establishing career structures in agriculture that are inherently interesting and commercially attractive, serves to characterize what Mohammed Brik set out to achieve. "First we try to push the idea that agricultural produce should have higher value. To do this we need the right commercial strategies, including more exports. Second, while young people are attracted by government loans they don't think of using them within agriculture, so we need to demonstrate that we have the commercial skills to sell at the right price."

Meanwhile, the association is also pinning its hopes on another, more altruistic appeal. Touiza is a traditional communal solidarity ethos in which people help each other on a voluntary basis. It was commonly performed



#### Project:

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for the old, or those not able to work, or those lacking the training for a particular task. The members of El Argoub refer to partnership as touiza because they want to keep the concept alive within local culture. After almost 50 years of experience in palm-tree farming, one association member wants to share his experience and know-how with the younger generation in a manner very much in keeping with touiza.

"Students from the university and young farmers come and attend what I'm doing on the ground," says Moulai Moulai. "They can follow what I'm doing, so that they can learn and gain experience. The students at the university need more time in the field watching what farmers are doing, compared to the amount of time they spend in class." He is philosophical about the benefit of giving away his hard-earned insights. "I don't want to die and take all this knowledge with me."

#### Employed by design

An EU programme to improve youth employability in Algeria received a boost when the ETF was called in to support its development. ETF expertise was needed to design active employment measures ranging from education and training to micro-credit and support for entrepreneurs.

**Source:** ETF Helps Make New EU Programme Success, [etf.europa.eu](http://etf.europa.eu)

As Mohammed Brik observes, a farmer can't rely any more on having one or two children who can take over the business and keep it going. He hopes that El Argoub will help to develop a compelling proposition for young people that combines the very modern objectives of deriving commercial results from sustainable farming with the age-old values of solidarity based on touiza, and in the process promote education, employment, and social cohesion in Laghouat and beyond.

### Learning to make better policy

An in-depth review of the Algerian labour market by the ETF highlights the need for approaches based as much on learning from what went wrong in certain projects as from what was successful in others. Using what they learn, government can work together with the private sector to develop policy.

**Source:** Employment Policies and Active Labour Market Programmes in Algeria, [etf.europa.eu](http://etf.europa.eu)



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The ETF is an EU agency that helps transition and developing countries to harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training and labour market systems in the context of the EU's external relations policy.