

Empower Women Entrepreneurs for Peace in Niger

Niger

College of The Atlantic

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Summary

This project empowered women entrepreneurs with the knowledge, skills, and experience to sustainably run and scale up their businesses, bringing financial stability and peace within their community and the Nigerien society at large.

Project Description

Growing up in Niger, a developing country with more than 43% of its population living in extreme poverty and high unemployment rates, I have always aspired to be part of the solution by bringing my modest contributions. As a passionate business student, I decided to focus my project on empowering the entrepreneurs of my community who are solving the socio-economic problems of our society, creating jobs, and reducing poverty. I chose particularly to work with women entrepreneurs in the agri-business sector because this industry serves as a primary source of income for more than 80% of the population. The women I worked with have an enterprise called Fara'a, a food-processing business, and they come from disadvantaged backgrounds with very little schooling. My approach for this project has been to empower them with the business skills, knowledge, and experience to sustainably run and scale up their business.

My project took place in Niamey, my hometown, where I am part of a network of entrepreneurs and change-makers of the community. To better deliver this project, I sought the counsel of women leaders in the field. I connected with Ms. Rayanatou Laouli, a professional consultant on project management and evaluation, and Ms. Fatouma Samake, the appointed gender equality specialist at the African Union who helps raise the voices of women for equal opportunities. Last but not least, I connected with Ms. Mahamadou Nana Balkisa who is in charge of training women entrepreneurs at the Niger Chambers of Commerce. All of these women shared their experiences working on similar projects and gave me invaluable insights and advice that guided me through the execution of my project.

The project started with capacity building through workshops in the areas of financial literacy and general business management. The workshops were run by professionals in the field, and in addition to the Fara'a cooperative, we were joined by a group of women entrepreneurs whose businesses are in making tailored clothing, natural juices, cosmetics, and skincare products. The workshop covered topics including enterprise legalization, accounting practices, supply chain management, loan applications, personnel management, and goal setting - making sure the firm's activities align with its mission and values.

Beyond the workshop, the project supported the women entrepreneurs in enhancing their marketing endeavors to elevate their brand image, attract a new customer base, and foster customer loyalty. Collaborating with a professional graphic designer, we revamped the visual aesthetics of their packaging, introducing a new logo and design. The packaging material was also upgraded to a higher quality, making it both more accessible and cost-effective. We anticipate that these improvements will help boost sales and Fara'a cooperative's competitiveness in the market.

I experienced several changes, starting with price increases across all products and services due to inflation despite which I did not perceive the need for additional fundraising. Second, research and conversations with locals revealed that product certification might not significantly impact Fara'a's customer reach and sales. Therefore we explored alternative strategies, developing marketing plans to

place their products in popular boutiques and innovating versatile gift baskets for occasions like weddings, Ramadan, and baby showers. A detailed execution plan was in place.

Unfortunately, we were prevented from pursuing those plans due to circumstances beyond our control. On July 26th, Niger faced a Coup d'Etat with the military forces taking over the political power of the country from the democratically elected president. Niamey was the first city to experience the abrupt changes as the military monitored the roads that led to the presidential palace. The news soon created tension in the city as people started protesting and manifesting, making it very unsafe. We had to temporarily stop the project activities, as we received instructions to stay home for our safety. As we waited for things to calm down before continuing the project, the beginning of the academic year for my graduate studies in a Dutch university was approaching. With the support of Projects for Peace and my campus liaison, I was able to leave the country just in time to pursue my studies in The Netherlands. Thanks to the flexibility of Projects for Peace, my project is able to continue even without my presence, as the remaining funds were donated to a non-profit organization that shares similar objectives and engages in similar activities. The organization is called Get Up Woman and it is a well structured network of women entrepreneurs from all the regions of Niger, coming together to support one another through workshops, trainings, and fairs.

At Get Up Woman, I am in contact with Ms. Nana Balkisa Mamane who is an experienced professional in the field of women's entrepreneurship in Niger, and whom I met during the summer while working on my project. She shared with me a prior project proposal which they had not been able to execute due to lack of funding. The project perfectly aligns with my project as it is targeted towards women in the food processing business and constitutes a capacity building workshop on food processing methodologies, financial literacy, enterprise management, marketing strategies, and how to improve the visual appearance of packaging. Ms. Balkisa will lead the project activities and will share updates as the project progresses. Get Up Woman is grateful to have the opportunity to implement this project thanks to the Project for Peace funding.

Reflection

Peace is the state of mental, emotional, and physical well-being that leads to a sense of safety, tranquility, and security. This well-being starts with access to basic human needs, including food, water, and shelter. This project helped build peace for a community of women via entrepreneurship, as it is a vehicle that gives access to the basic human needs through economic empowerment. Recognizing that women are the backbone of families and society, whether as mothers, spouses, or small business owners, empowering them is bringing financial stability, security, and peace into their homes, communities, and the Nigerien society at large. By creating a safe space of learning and growth through the workshop this project allowed the participants to share their worries and challenges, and use one another as a force to overcome them and reach a state of inner peace. Empowered and transformed, they each began implementing the new acquired knowledge into their daily business activities. For instance, some who had performed their activities informally for years have now started the process of formalizing their business after learning about the advantages including access to loans. Others who had not previously separated their personal and business finances have now established a plan to better manage both finances separately after learning that it is important for successful financial growth.

There were no major conflicts during the execution of this project. The group of women was very dynamic, collaborative, and empathetic, which made working with them a real pleasure. I believe this project was an incredible learning experience for the women entrepreneurs as much as for myself. After supporting these entrepreneurs in building strong business foundations, the next step in the journey would be to export their products abroad as they all stated during the workshop: "their dream would be to

compete in the global market, bringing products made in Niger to the world". Inspired, I aspire to use my International Business education to support them in that mission by building a platform where people from anywhere in the world can learn about, and purchase products made in Niger.

Personal Statement

"Entrepreneurship can serve as a powerful bridge to building peace in a community." Taibatou Adamou.