THE ARGAN OIL OF MOROCCO
The production of fair trade argan oil in pictures

The TDC supports the Tighanimine women’s cooperative, which produces fair trade argan oil in Morocco's south, since 2010. There is much demand for this oil not only as a miraculous ingredient for cosmetics, but also as a flavour for cooking.

The TDC has sent a reporter to Morocco for a look behind the scenes of the production process and the lives of the workers, all of which are Berber women.

All photos: © Eric de Mildt for BTC’s Trade for Development Centre, 2015.
The Souss-Massa-Drâa region is facing many challenges, such as desertification, illiteracy and poverty in the Berber communities.

A sustainable solution for the region inevitably includes the trade in local assets such as argan oil, dates and saffron.
Tighanimine, a women's cooperative that produces fair trade argan oil is operating in this region.

Nadia, to the right in the picture, is the president of this cooperative. In 2011 Tighanimine was the first cooperative to be Fairtrade certified for its argan oil.

Thanks to this certification the 68 women of the cooperative could double their income in two years' time.

This cooperative could rely on financial support of the Trade for Development Centre (TDC) in the following domains: improving management capacities, developing quality control systems and creating communication materials for exposure on the Moroccan and European market.
"The story behind the creation of this cooperative is rather extraordinary. I settled in this region after my marriage. My husband was from this village. I wanted to contribute and help these women," says Nadia (in the middle of the picture).

"First, I started with literacy classes. During these classes, the women repeatedly came up with the idea of creating an argan oil cooperative. It has been a long journey since, full of obstacles. "
"I was the first one to work for the cooperative when it was created," says the mother of Fadna, Malika and Aïcha (to the far right in the picture).

"I became ill and could not work anymore. My oldest daughter Fadna also started working for the cooperative the year it was created. Now, I am assisted by my three daughters. Working in a structured environment has changed our lives and given us the possibility to meet our needs and those of our families."
The first stage in the argan oil production process is the gathering stage.

It starts early in the morning. At six in the morning, the women start looking for the fruit of the argan groves.

They roam the forests surrounding their villages to gather their crop.

It consists in picking the fruit that has dropped from the trees.
The women only pick the fruit that has dropped from the trees. That way, they respect the cycles of nature and do not touch the tree’s fruits.

These argan groves actually also serve as a wall against desertification of this drought-stricken region.
First, the pulp is separated from the core by hitting the fruit with a smooth stick.

Then, with the stick, the nuts are split to extract the kernel which will be mechanically pressed later.
The extracted kernels are carefully deposited in small baskets.

Each woman has her own basket and a cloth bag with her name and first name.

After weighing, at the end of the week, their work can be assessed. Each kilo of kernels brings in 35 dirhams (3.2 euros).
It takes 64 to 65 kilos of nuts to extract one litre of argan oil.

This explains how expensive this product is on the market, even if the women are paid little for the effort made.
Also the presses are purpose-made: Some machines are specifically made for extracting argan oil for consumption and others are made for extracting argan oil for cosmetics.

After the crushing, comes the roasting process. Unlike kernels used for cosmetics, oil for consumption is obtained from roasted kernels.
One of the machines had a breakdown.

After working three years for the Tighanimine cooperative, these machines have no secrets anymore for Malika.

With her basket, she collects the tools required. She assesses, unscrews a bolt, gives a few hits, considers the issue, makes a diagnosis and repeatedly succeeds in restarting the machine.

Suddenly, she smiles. A note of joy in her voice and her eyes brighten up: Mission accomplished!
Argan oil is used in cosmetics and in culinary products.

Tighanimine also supplies finished products such as soap and lotion.

Rich in polyunsaturated fatty acids, in linoleic acids (an omega-6 fatty acid) and in vitamin E, argan oil is reputed for its medicinal properties and boasts titles such as "Moroccan gold" or "the beauty secret of Moroccan women".
Malika sits next to small bottles of argan oil. She is getting married next month. Her first condition is to continue working for the cooperative. "Soon, I will have worked for three years for the cooperative. I will not quit my job. I like what I do.

In the past we had several young women working with us, but every time one of them was marrying, they left the cooperative and stayed at home, under the pressure of the husband and the in-laws.

Many women in the village would like to work for the cooperative and earn some money, but their husbands, brothers and fathers refuse them this right. Working women are not yet accepted or valued," confides Malika.
About 40 of the 68 women working for the Tighanimine cooperative attend literacy classes.

Thanks to their work and these classes, these women can become emancipated and can fight ignorance, discrimination and poverty.

Some of these women have even become the family's main breadwinner.