

Aid to Artisans

Fall 2019 Newsletter



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Cover Image: Bloomist artisan products featuring Tunisian Sejnania beads.
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Photographs by Troy House and David Chow, courtesy of Bloomist

Back Cover: Embroiderer in Sitalá, Mexico. Photograph by Daniel Hernandez Delgadillo

ATA “plants” seeds of change in Mexico that sprout into better communities

Last September Aid to Artisans (ATA) celebrated local poor women in the highland city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Hundreds of women came from 56 different communities to be greeted by ATA in our offices. The 290 indigenous women, some of whom were disabled and others who care for disabled family members, received a little bag filled corn, a sacred food in the Mayan culture, and seed money to help them launch business initiatives. After the ceremony, we accompanied each woman to the bank to cash her \$350 check and helped purchase items she needed to launch her business. “The aim is for women between 18 and 35 years old to engage in productive activity that will enable them to

overcome extreme poverty,” says Elena Gómez Martínez, Project Director for ATA in Mexico.

The seed celebration was part of a larger initiative, “Empowerment of Young Women through Graduation, and Financial inclusion” that began in July 2018 and includes 1553 women from 11 municipalities in Chiapas. The goal: Economic empowerment and financial inclusion. With our partner in Mexico, “Trickleup Las Americas,” the financial project focuses on women from parts of Chiapas identified as the poorest in the country. The municipalities include San Juan Cancuc, Sitalá, Chilón, Ocosingo, Altamirano, Chenalhó, Chalchihuitán, Mitontic, Huixtán, San Andrés



Araceli Pérez Hernández,
“Nueva Morelia” Ocosin-
go Municipality, a reci-
pient of seed capital

Director in Mexico of Trickleup the Americas: Daniel Alfaro and María Eugenia Pineda Director in Mexico of CL-ATA delivering seed capital



Larrainzar and Amatenango del Valle.

Already, 987 of the women in the program have established savings accounts. While just a few of the women who are part of the project received seed money to kick start their entrepreneurial ventures, Martinez says the other women “are using their own resources, motivated by the Human Development training we gave them on topics such as leadership and female empowerment.” The result is transformational, not only for each woman and her family, but also their communities. Martinez says the participants are becoming community motivators, helping other women to find solutions to problems their communities face. For example, in Chalchihuitán women now manage efforts to address water scarcity.

The women have started grocery stores, yarn outlets, and pottery stores. Other women are crafting textiles, designing and producing artisanal blouses for sale. Still others are selling seeds — corn, beans and peanuts — and also selling fruit and vegetable, roasted chicken, and even shoes. “With the advice of the ATA team, each woman followed her own productive activity plan,” explains Martinez.

Three months after the program started the results are visible and life changing. “Women are very happy since they have doubled their investment and in the most cases, they have the resources to improve their living conditions,” says Martinez, who is proud of the change brought about by a program she helped plan and put into place. “For me, this project has been very important in helping to improve the living conditions of women and families by having their own income. This project is collaborative and our team has tools to guide, motivate and train women,



Delivery of seed capital at CL-ATA Mexico offices “Agua Viva” group of the municipality of Chenalho, with members of the CL-ATA team

and support their initiatives.”

The women are using their additional income to improve diets, their homes and to buy educational materials for their kids. In addition, support from family members has been very strong . ATA’s program has the indirect support of husbands, brothers and family members, explains Martinez. And that support has brought communities together even more. That’s because “savings groups are an organizational space for the women of each community. These networks bring women together to discuss their problems and develop solutions.”

Women are advising each other about how to improve their living conditions. As part

of the “Empowerment of Young Women through Graduation and Financial Inclusion, the women meet at least twice a month. The connections help strengthen participants’ solidarity, supports feelings of empowerment, and fosters leadership.

“These activities have encouraged us to remain committed to poor people and especially to women as agents of change and promoters of economic and social improvement of their communities,” says Martinez.

By Cari Shane
Photographs by ATA Mexico staff



María Domínguez and Isabela Cruz Vázquez from the group Embroiderers of the Chacte Community in San Juan Cancuc waiting to receive their seed capital



Women of the municipality of San Juan Cancuc, willing to start their venture on the day of the delivery of their seed capital

Tunisia Program Ends with a Bright Future Ahead

Our two-year CAP-X project in Tunisia ended recently and resulted in growing US export market connections for artisans entrepreneurs. With our partners, the International Organization for Human Development (IDH) and the National Office of Handicraft (ONAT), the CAP-X export development program has successfully linked Tunisian artisans with US buyers. The program was funded by the US State Department, through the US Embassy in Tunis.

Alex Bates, of US retailer [Bloomist](#), began working in Tunisia at the CAP-X Market Readiness Program and Design Workshop in March 2018. While developing artisan

collections for the project that were shown at NY NOW and Las Vegas, Alex fell in love with the Mediterranean country and its' rich traditions. Alex developed exclusive products for Bloomist with two CAP-X entrepreneurs, natural clay beads (with Zaineb Farhat of Sejnania) and terra cotta vessels (with Monia Rassâa of [Ekho Design](#)). Bloomist will expand their Tunisian product line next year and plans to launch three new artisan partnerships in the spring.

In the northern Tunisian hills near the Mediterranean coast, lies Sejnane, a name now synonymous with both the place and an iconic style of Amazigh pottery-making. Sejnane is a rural area of about 6,000 people



Low fired traditional Tunisian pottery from Sejnania

Large Tunisian handcrafted beads by Sejnania available at Bloomist



Photograph by Troy House, courtesy of Bloomist

where traditional craft skills have been passed from mother to daughter over many generations, with each artist contributing her own ideas to this tradition. Sejnane pottery was recently named an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, recognizing its place in Tunisia's cultural heritage.

Zaineb and Sejnania began working with us in April 2018. It was a challenge to carefully pack and ship their first order of delicate low-fired pottery, and several products arrived in the US broken. The artisans have improved their production and shipping processes thanks to a team of support from CAP-X and buyers like Bloomist. As a result, Bloomist has been placing successively larger orders. The exclusive beads have become a best seller and Zaineb has successfully delivered five orders. The beads can be purchased [directly on the Bloomist website](#).

Monia Rassâa — designer, design instructor,

ceramicist, and founder of Tunisia's [Ekho Design](#) — didn't always want to be a designer: "When I was eight, my plan was to become a teacher — so I'd be able to sell ice cream during the summer," she says with a laugh. Product design, though, was in her blood, and she created her first piece of furniture at 15. Later, while working on her doctoral thesis, she looked into the creative possibilities of marrying modern sensibilities with the rich cultural heritage embedded in the work of Tunisia's artisans.

Today she collaborates with a small group of artisans on Ekho's collections of elegant and evocative ceramics: "Each artisan contributes a unique perspective, both artistic and technical — which in turn creates new aesthetic contours, linking modernity and tradition."

Monia works in Nabeul, a small town not far from the capital. Monia first met Alex in

CL-ATA's Local Market Readiness Program — MRP in 2018. She attended a second ATA trade show preparation training held by IDH and CL-ATA trainer Nathalie Tancrede before exhibiting at the Tunisian artisan trade show known as KRAM.

When CAP-X began working with Monia, the challenges included high shipping costs, limited availability of packing and shipping materials and limited payment options for overseas transactions.

Monia is now successfully exporting to Bloomist, and her terracotta goblet planters can be purchased directly on the Bloomist website. While at the KRAM show, Monia also met ATA-supported buyer Laurie Kanes of US based retailer 12 Small Things. Laurie has placed orders with Ekho Design, and Monia's products are now for sale in the 12 Small Things retail shop in San Francisco.



Zaineb Farhat of Sejnania. Photography courtesy of Sejnania

Our goal is always to have an impact that can be sustained long after the project has ended. Tunisia's artisan skills and heritage have sparked interest on the global stage, and as these relationships continue to grow, so too will the incomes of artisans and keepers of the intangible heritage of Tunisia.



Tunisian Terracotta gobblett planters by Ekho Design available at Bloomist

Photograph by David Chaw, courtesy of Bloomist



Monia Rassâa of Ekho Design. Photography courtesy of Bloomist

Written by Lauren Barkume with stories and photographs courtesy of Bloomist

Holiday message from Aid to Artisans

2019 has been a fruitful year for Aid to Artisans. Throughout the year, we strengthened and improved our training methodology, expanded our work into new countries, and increased market linkages for thousands of artisan beneficiaries and entrepreneurs. With projects in Lesotho, China, Mexico, Djibouti, Tunisia, and our training programs at the Las Vegas Market, and NY NOW, we were able to identify new ways to measure our impact. Our commitment to empowering artisans around the globe is steadfast and stronger than ever.

As we look back at 2019 and prepare for 2020, we want to extend our sincerest gratitude to the people and organizations we work with. Our work is made possible by a community of staff, volunteers, interns, partners, consultants, and donors who believe in our mission and goals. We are grateful for the time and collaboration over the years from our community. From our family to yours, we wish you a wonderful holiday and new year.

Wondering how you can help? This holiday season, consider [a tax-deductible donation](#) to Aid to Artisans & Creative Learning. Donations directly support the work we do in empowering artisans around the world!



What's Next!

Winter 2020 @ Las Vegas Market

ATA Mexico will be exhibiting again this January at Las Vegas Market. Applications open in February for the [July 2020 TEAM](#) program. TEAM is a full-support trade show experience for exhibitors--training that gives artisan businesses real opportunity to learn about selling and exhibiting and then participating in a US trade show. As part of the TEAM experience, ATA provides pre-show webinars and feedback on everything from pricing to merchandising. Only 10 spaces will be available, so apply early.

What are our alumni saying?

"The help provided by the team is invaluable due to the experience of each of the people who support the follow-up until they reach the fair" - Carlos Rendón of Azure Jewelry

Want to know more or be the first to know when applications open? Contact us at MaudO@creativelearning.org

Market Readiness Program

The [Market Readiness Program™](#) (MRP) is a unique hands-on training experience everyone in the artisan sector. Held every August at NY NOW, the premier Home and Lifestyle trade show, the 4 ½-day program is designed for international artisan producers, designers, exporters as well as the leadership of craft-based enterprises.

Our program provides intensive preparation for entry into the U.S. retail market. Throughout the program, you will have the opportunity to tour NY NOW accompanied by an industry mentor who will guide you to discover potential markets opportunities for your products.

Join the hundreds of men and women, from more than 45 countries, who since 1993 have trained with Aid to Artisans' Market Readiness Program™. Applications open soon. For more information please contact us at LaurenB@creativelearning.org.



Aid to Artisans

Artisans around the world need your support!
Please make a donation by clicking [here](#).

