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SUCCESS STORY

Cooperative Yields Export Opportunities for Burkina Faso Artisans

Village Artisanal de Ouagadougou expands its reach into new international markets, including the U.S.



Photo: USAID West Africa Trade Hub

Director Patricia Badolo shows off hand-woven purses, some of the hundreds of handcrafted items produced by Village Artisanal de Ouagadougou.

The USAID West Africa Trade Hub introduced VAO to the American market, paying for booth space at U.S. trade-shows, linking them with buyers and providing technical assistance to prepare for larger orders.

Village Artisanal de Ouagadougou (VAO) has perfected the notion of one-stop shopping. Its campus, in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, houses a boutique, café and workshops for more than 500 artisans who create a wide variety of handicrafts and home décor.

The sheer number of artisans under its roof makes VAO the leading producer of handicrafts in Burkina Faso. Master craftsmen and their apprentices produce large volumes of bronze and ebony sculptures, hand-woven cloth purses and wall hangings, traditional musical instruments, wooden children's toys, wrought silver and gold jewelry, dyed baskets, pottery, and leather bags and boxes.

That capacity means VAO can meet the demands of the international market, as they've shown with exports to the U.S., Canada, Europe and North Africa. Many of their products are also duty-free when exported to the U.S., since Burkina Faso became eligible to benefit from the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) in 2005.

The USAID West Africa Trade Hub has sponsored VAO to exhibit at U.S. tradeshows, provided technical assistance and linked them with U.S. buyers. In 2005, the cooperative shipped 3,000 Tuareg leather boxes to the Marmaxx Group, parent company of retail giants TJ Maxx and Marshall's. In 2006, VAO expanded their American clientele, selling 3,000 leather boxes to Cost Plus/World Market and smaller orders to the Hunger Site and Tesoros Trading Company.

It's not all about the bottom line, however. VAO provides training and consultation for its artisans, holding sessions on subjects such as product design and pricing. Their artisans will eventually "graduate," hopefully improving their individual businesses via lessons learned.

In August 2006, VAO's products were spotlighted at Pangea, the new educational retail shop and café at the headquarters of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) in Washington, D.C.

Its newly expanded facilities include 14 new workshops, already occupied.

"We have requests all the time from artisans who want to join us," said VAO's director, Patricia Badolo.