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Swiss help put Palestinian produce on the table

Palestinians returning from shopping are more likely to be carrying home a basket full of Israeli produce than local goods.

Around one-third of the West Bank is farmed, yet most meat, fresh fruit and vegetables are imported because the quantity of local produce is insufficient, and many people do not trust the quality.

A Swiss-sponsored project is for the first time bringing together producers and retailers to try to change the negative perceptions of Palestinian products and help farmers raise their share of the local market.

"Buy Palestinian"

The pilot phase of the project concentrated on promoting Palestinian consumer goods in the local market. The message was: "Buy Palestinian because it's good for you, your health, your economy". But this was not enough, because when people were asked why they would rather buy foreign products the answer was always that the quality was better, there was an expiry date and you could read the nutritional values on the labels. In short, there were standards. Palestinian producers had to listen to consumers to understand what is expected by the Palestinian consumers. Six cooperatives and three private agricultural companies signed up to a project called 'In Tajuna'.

Take for example Jiftlik. The fertile lands of Jiftlik lie in the central Jordan Valley near to the ancient city of Jericho. Approaching the village from Jerusalem you come close to the lowest point on Earth - the Dead Sea, which marks the border with Jordan. The landscape is rocky and barren and the air smells sulphurous. A sign at the side of the road indicates that we are at 300 metres below sea level. Then the road rises and green fields come into view.

This area is the bread basket of the West Bank and traditionally an important exporter of fruit and vegetables. Blazing hot in the summer, the main planting and harvesting time is from September to June. Collectively the 200 farmers cultivate 30,000 dunams (3000ha) of land, producing tomatoes, squash, cucumber, aubergines and peppers.

The farmers list the problems they encounter on a daily basis, from lack of fresh water to grow profitable citrus fruits to no access to farm roads at night. Most of Jiftlik is in Area C, where the Palestinian authority has responsibility for civil life such as health and education while Israel retains full control over security and administration related to territory, including land.

There are several Israeli settlements in the area, and many of the farmers are forced to hire themselves out as labour because their own output is not enough to sustain them.

One main problem is the packaging and marketing of their produce. Collaboration with a Palestinian packaging company means they will no longer have to rely on the Israelis.

"If I produced cherry tomatoes I was obliged to sell for four shekels a kilo although production-wise it was costing me seven shekels per kilo," a farmer explained. "I was paying the Israeli packaging house to package my tomatoes so I could access Israeli or international markets through Israeli wholesalers."

One of the aims of 'In Tajuna' is to make the farmers' produce directly available to a wider market, through better distribution. Cooperatives have never attempted to collectively market their own product. The project developers believe they can reach two million consumers, and 'In Tajuna' will not only open up the domestic market to local producers, but also eventually allow them to export their produce abroad.

While there are clear benefits for the producers, they are also running a risk by committing to the project. This has never happened before. First of all it's new for them to market, second it's new for them to distribute the merchandise on their own and third it's new for them to attempt to make the consumer aware of who they are. But the farmers of the Jiftlik cooperative are optimistic: "We think that this is the first step in a road of one million steps. But at least it's the first step." *from swissinfo*



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