



Cooperatives in Morocco: Driving a Sustainable Rural Future

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Introduction: The Rise of Moroccan Cooperatives

Moroccan cooperatives have become a driving force in inclusive rural development, combining cultural and agricultural knowledge with innovative, community-based economic models (Ihendyane, Aissaoui, Kadiri & Mansour, 2024). Anchored in values of solidarity and mutual support, these cooperatives actively involve rural populations—particularly smallholder farmers, women, and youth—providing them with opportunities to generate income, access national and international markets, and strengthen social capital (Agricultural Development Agency, 2008).

For centuries, Moroccan women have preserved and practised artisanal skills—passed down through generations—crafting rich in cultural symbolism and regional identity.



(Aherrahrou, Ouhennou, & Aajly, 2024). Yet, despite their aesthetic and cultural depth, these skills remained largely confined to the domestic sphere for much of history—rarely integrated into the mainstream economy, and too often undervalued in both socially and economically.

Since the 1990s, this situation has begun to change with the rise of women's cooperatives. These cooperatives have gradually broken the constraints of traditional gender roles, enabling women to move from the margins to the forefront and become vital drivers of local economies and catalysts for more inclusive and sustainable rural development (Benarafa, 2025).

The Moroccan government has proactively worked to dismantle traditional gender roles as part of its broader development agenda. Launched in 2005, the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH) has supported more than 22,000 projects, including over 6,000 cooperatives, placing rural women's empowerment at the centre of national development (Benarafa, 2025).

Building on this, the Green Morocco Plan (2008–2020) actively promoted the creation of cooperatives and other forms of social and solidarity economy (SSE), particularly among small producers, youth, and women. Its second pillar specifically targeted small-scale farming, aiming to alleviate poverty and enhance rural livelihoods. Under solidarity agriculture, 989 projects benefited 730,000 people, leading to tree planting on 438,455 hectares, 450 processing units, 83,960 hectares of irrigation, and 545 km of rural roads (Ministry of Agriculture, Morocco, 2019).

This directly benefited women and community-based cooperatives, which are predominantly composed of smallholder farmers. The exact proportion of women's cooperatives benefiting from this program is not publicly specified in official reports. The World Bank (2021) and FAO (2022) Studies suggest 30–40% of beneficiaries could be women-led cooperatives or female farmers, given their strong presence in the sector (Financial aid, Training & capacity-building and Market access). During the Green Morocco Plan (PMV, 2008–2020), over 1,000 women-led agri-cooperatives were established, particularly in high-value sectors like argan oil and saffron (FAO, 2021). Initiatives such as the EU-funded MOROCCO program and the e-commerce platform Derematek further strengthened women's market access (Oxfam Morocco, 2020).

Building on this foundation, the Green Generation Strategy (GG, 2020–2030) has accelerated support for women's cooperatives through expanded funding (grants, low-interest loans), digital inclusion (Derematek e-commerce, E-Fellah advisory app) and Climate resilience (solar-powered irrigation, drought-resistant crops), (Ministry of Agriculture, Morocco 2023). By promoting more inclusive growth, the plan ensured that



women and cooperatives played an integral role in Morocco's agricultural transformation.

Notably, the enactment of Law No. 112-12 (2014) simplified the process of forming and registering cooperatives. The law reduced the minimum number of founding members from 7 to 5, and in specific cases, such as women- or youth-led cooperatives, to as few as 2 (Law No.112-12, 2014). These policies have lowered barriers to entry and encouraged greater formalisation and participation as well as inclusive growth. They have fostered access to public financing, conditional tax exemptions and institutional support. Furthermore, they have strengthened the role of women in Morocco's rural transformation.

Driven by targeted policies and social mobilisation, Morocco's cooperative sector grew remarkably — from 15,735 cooperatives in 2015 (Angade, 2024) to 53,856 in 2023 (ODCO, 2023). These cooperatives now comprise more than 600,000 registered members, a substantial proportion of whom are women and youth (Angade, 2024). Particularly, women-led cooperatives are prominent in agri-food processing, traditional crafts, and natural cosmetics, enhancing household incomes, fostering entrepreneurship, and advancing socio-economic development.

Despite progress in advancing the legal and institutional framework, turning these developments into tangible outcomes and shifts in attitudes remains challenging. Women cooperators still have to navigate patriarchal norms, balancing domestic duties with cooperative work, and dealing with restrictions on mobility and the requirement for male family consent for land use. This requires a sustained and coordinated effort from all stakeholders within Moroccan society.

South–South Cooperation: A Chinese Delegation's Field Visit

Amid growing global interest in sustainable development, women's economic empowerment, and agroecological innovation, a Chinese delegation of scholars and practitioners, organised by BAOBAB as a key follow-up to the Secretariat's March 2024 visit, reflects its ongoing work in this technical field, recently conducted a field visit in northern Morocco in April in 2025. The visit included cooperative sites in Tetouan and Chefchaouen, offering insights into their structure, function, and impact of these local initiatives within the broader context of South–South cooperation and inclusive rural development.

This visit aimed to explore how these cooperatives harness local resources and traditional knowledge to strengthen rural economies, empower women, and contribute to Sustainable Development Goals, such as gender equality and responsible production.



The delegation also sought to lay the groundwork for future international research cooperation and support mechanisms, promoting exchanges between China and Morocco and within broader multilateral frameworks.

I. Aghssane Cooperative: A Model for Rural Innovation and Sustainable Development in Northern Morocco

Located in Douar Mechrouha, Commune Zaytoune Zarqa, Tétouan, Morocco, the [Aghssane Cooperative](#) has become a beacon of sustainable rural development in an area with limited employment opportunities. The cooperative manages 3.5 hectares of land acquired from five households. While most raw materials are sourced locally, the cooperative has also introduced exotic plant species such as *Moringa oleifera* and *Origanum majorana*, along with cultivated herbs including basil, thyme, bay laurel, and *Mentha pulegium*, among others.

With a focus on empowering women and youth, the cooperative actively promotes inclusive growth through skill development, self-employment, and community ownership over production and marketing processes. The cooperative avoids chemical fertilisers and pesticides and embraces organic agricultural practices, helping to preserve soil fertility and ecological balance.

Aghssane exemplifies the successful integration of traditional knowledge with modern techniques, establishing itself as a model of innovation. Rather than relying on the sale of raw materials, the cooperative has invested in value-added processing infrastructure—including drying units, distillation systems, and cold-pressing facilities—enabling it to enhance local income and build a more resilient, market-oriented rural economy.

The visit began at the drying section, where four distinct methods were explained—natural sun-drying, solar-powered systems, air-pump heat drying, and gas-fired drying—each selected based on the specific properties of the raw plant materials. This was followed by the pressing section, which features a temperature-regulated system. The primary unit processes up to one tonne per batch, while a smaller 200-litre unit is reserved for delicate floral species such as roses. One kilogram of roses yields approximately 1.5 litres of rose hydrosol, which is subsequently separated into essential oil and purified hydrosol using steam distillation and a water-recirculating cooling system.



Visit the Drying Facilities. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Distillation Systems and Cold-Pressing Facilities. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

Following processing, products are meticulously packaged and stored on-site. Aghssane also operates a small laboratory that supports quality assurance and product development, as well as a retail shop offering direct sales of its value-added herbal and cosmetic products.



On-site Facility for Packaging and Storage. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Products in the Retail Shop. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

In recent years, the cooperative has diversified into aromatic ecotourism, constructing a homestay facility to accommodate visitors and promote local aromatic plant culture. The homestay spans three floors, beautifully adorned with Moroccan Zellij patterns on the walls and staircases. Guest rooms are located on the ground floor, next to an open, welcoming area. Near the entrance, an inset staircase leads to the first floor, where a cosy dining and lounge space features red brick walls, warm wooden accents, string-style lighting, and a conveniently located lavatory.



Continuing upward, the staircase opens onto a rooftop terrace with breathtaking panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and lush greenery — a perfect spot to the serene natural beauty.



Panoramic View from the Rooftop Terrace. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Panoramic View from the Rooftop Terrace. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Additional infrastructure includes a nursery greenhouse, a water storage tank, and a wastewater retention pond—demonstrating the cooperative’s commitment to environmental sustainability.



Nursery Greenhouse. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Water Storage Tank and the Storage Pond. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



View of the Storage Pond with Ducks Raised by the Cooperative. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

Perhaps most importantly, Aghssane has incorporated renewable energy into its operations. The cooperative runs a grid-connected photovoltaic solar energy system with a total installed capacity of 380 kW, supported by three converters. Funded by the government but locally operated and maintained, this solar system significantly reduces the cooperative's energy costs and carbon footprint, advancing their energy independence.



Solar Panel and Air Source Heat Pump. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

The region faces several socio-economic challenges. Enduring poverty and elevated school dropout rates continue to pose serious concerns. Limited land availability constraints agricultural productivity, often prompting families to sell their land and migrate to urban centres. Girls, in particular, face significant barriers to education stemming from the absence of boarding facilities in rural schools. Additionally, escalating transportation costs, and deeply entrenched gender norms also discourage and inhibit their mobility.





Group Photo with Aghssane Cooperative and Chinese Delegation. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

II. Generations in Action: the Family-Led Cooperative and the Future of Rural Morocco

Nestled in the foothills of the Moroccan Atlas Mountains, [Coopérative Raihan](#) was not born of commercial ambition, but of a family's shared vision—rooted in their bond with the land and traditions. What began as a dream has grown into one of northern Morocco's most recognised models of sustainable, family-led rural enterprise.



Group photo with Raihan Cooperative and Chinese Delegation. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

Founded in the Tetouan Province, Raihan was established by a father—an engineer who returned from the city, determined to build a future in the countryside. Drawing on his technical expertise and the help from his eldest son, he constructed the cooperative's infrastructure himself—laying each stone with the same care that defines the cooperative's ethos today. The name “Raihan,” referring to a fragrant plant that symbolises purity and cultural heritage, reflects the spirit of the enterprise: natural, rooted, and enduring.

Raihan is self-funded and operated by six family members, who oversee the cooperative's daily operations. Seasonal labour is engaged only during harvest and screening periods. The cooperative owns 4 hectares of land, benefitting from a nearby reservoir that ensures reliable irrigation and production stability.



Group Photo by Lakeside. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Planting Area of the Cooperative. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

Over the years, Raihan has grown in both scale and recognition. It now holds local organic certification, European Ecocert accreditation, and the necessary qualifications to export its products. Members earn a base monthly salary, supplemented by performance-based incentives that are considered relatively high within the local community—fostering strong working motivation, a sense of collective responsibility and shared achievement.



Raihan's operations lie in a well-integrated set of production facilities. The cooperative houses a warehouse, temperature-controlled and solar-powered drying chamber, a stainless steel distillation system, a fully equipped laboratory, and an on-site retail shop—each component playing a vital role in ensuring product quality from field to consumer.



Drying Plants in the Warehouse. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Extraction Chamber. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Products in the Shop

The solar drying chamber, constructed with black light-absorbing panels and glass walls, efficiently retains heat while preserving the colour and properties of delicate plants. A system of external power metres and four-zone temperature indicators (45°C in the upper zone, 49°C in the lower) ensures optimal drying conditions across different plant types.



Solar Drying Chamber. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Controller of the Solar Drying Chamber. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

Distillation at Raihan is carried out using a 316L stainless steel unit, notable for being the only outdoor distillation system of its kind in northern Morocco. This robust equipment allows for both high-quality extraction and adaptability to seasonal production needs.



Distillation Unit. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



In the cooperative's laboratory, stringent quality control is carried out with care. Essential oils are stored in 50-litre stainless steel tanks, while carrier oils are kept in 20-litre plastic containers. With more than 20 varieties in rotation, the lab ensures that each product is meticulously preserved, tested, and ready for local sale or international export.

Raihan's product range reflects the richness of its environment and strong ties with local farmers. Bay laurel is primarily cultivated on-site, and it is also sourced through contract farming with local farmers. The cooperative produces a variety of high-quality products, including essential oils—such as oregano, lavender, mint, rose, and neroli hydrosols—and premium carrier oils like sweet almond, sesame, avocado, and aloe. Its offerings also feature in-house processed argan and rosemary oils, handcrafted potassium-based soaps, and dried aromatic plants for DIY herbal tea blends—each product carrying the scent and spirit of rural Morocco.

Beyond its production line, Raihan is a living example of how traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, can be combined with modern techniques to create high-quality, ethically made products for both domestic and international markets. Raihan Cooperative is more than a business—it is a story of resilience, rootedness, and respect for nature. Every bottle of oil, every bar of soap, every packet of dried herbs reflects the family's commitment to their land, their community, and to doing things the right way.

III. Led by Women, Rooted in the Land: The Story of Biosalim Cooperative

Situated along National Road No. 2 in Dar Aqoubaa Centre, Dardara Commune, Chefchaouen, [Coopérative Biosalim](#) – Agro Chaouen stands as a powerful testament to how agricultural innovation and women's empowerment can drive meaningful, lasting change in rural Morocco. Established in 2019 and fully operational since 2022, the cooperative's name—"Bio" (organic, healthy) and "Salim" (safe)—reflects its deep-rooted commitment to sustainable, responsible production that respects both nature and community.

With the support of the Moroccan government, Biosalim Cooperative is led by 30 dedicated women, aged between 23 and 55, who are driving change through organic farming and food processing. Their efforts breathe new life into the region's agricultural heritage while helping to protect the biodiversity of the Rif Mountains. Working both on family-owned plots and leased land, each member contributes to cultivating high-demand crops such as sorghum—bridging tradition and innovation to sustain their communities and the land they call home. Their collective efforts have earned national and international acclaim. Recognised as a "Model Women's Cooperative" by



the United Nations and certified by Morocco’s National Office for Food Safety (ONSSA), Biosalim stands as a symbol of quality, resilience, and inclusive rural development.

Equipped with essential tools—including grinding machines, pasta-makers, dryers, and oil extraction equipment—Biosalim supports a diverse and growing line of products. From couscous and pasta to culinary spices, black and yellow chickpeas, and planting seeds, many of its offerings are gluten-free and thoughtfully crafted to meet evolving market needs, while staying true to the region’s agricultural roots.

Yet, like many rural cooperatives in mountainous areas, Biosalim faces the enduring challenge of bringing its goods to broader markets. But these obstacles have not dimmed the spirit of its members. On the contrary, they move forward with quiet strength and unwavering resolve. The Biosalim Cooperative is more than a place of production—it is a testament to what can flourish when local wisdom, collective purpose, and sustainable values take root.



Group photo with Biosalim Cooperative and Chinese Delegation. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Visit the Production Unit. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Grinding Machine and Pulveriser. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Dry Berry. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.



Barley. Photo: Xiao Chenjuan.

Conclusion

As China and Morocco strengthen ties through South–South cooperation, the cooperatives emerge not only as models of inclusive development but also as platforms for shared learning and transformative collaboration.



The cooperatives grapple with a range of socio-economic and logistical challenges that hinder their development. Enduring poverty, high school dropout rates, and limited access to arable land restrict agricultural productivity and often drive families to migrate to urban areas. Girls face compounded barriers to education due to the absence of rural boarding facilities, rising transportation costs, and entrenched gender norms that limit their mobility. In remote, mountainous areas—like those where Biosalim operates—market access remains a major hurdle, as poor infrastructure and geographic isolation complicate distribution.

Yet, despite these obstacles, coopérative Aghssane, Raihan, and Biosalim bloom as powerful emblems of resilience, grassroots innovation, and hope. What began as a quiet commitment to ecological balance and women’s empowerment has evolved into a vibrant ecosystem of innovation, rural renewal and revitalisation.

For cooperatives to truly transform rural Morocco, three key measures are essential: (1) land tenure reforms enabling women’s ownership; (2) state investment in rural childcare services to free women’s labour; and (3) fair-trade partnerships that bypass exploitative intermediaries.

These are not merely cooperatives—they are the living pulse of a movement grounded in deep-rooted values. Here, sustainability is not just an aspiration; it is a daily practice, woven into the fabric of life. In the rhythm of their labour lies a quiet revolution. These women do more than cultivate the land—they nurture its spirit, transforming Morocco’s rich biodiversity of aromatic plants into products that carry the fragrance of heritage and the promise of a better tomorrow.

With each harvest and every handcrafted creation, the women of Moroccan cooperatives tend not only to the soil but to the seeds of hope, dignity, and change—growing a tomorrow shaped by their own hands.

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