

# Supporting artisans to defy poverty

**Bethlehem Fair Trade Artisans (BFTA) was founded in 2009 and is made up of both an NGO and a company. The company helps Palestinian artisans to export their goods, giving them access to international markets while ensuring a fair price and taking on the export logistics. The NGO provides training and development opportunities, allowing some of the most vulnerable communities to have a livelihood and grow their business.**

BFTA are currently working with 48 family-owned workshops, eight women's cooperatives and four centres which support people with disabilities. BFTA buy their products and export them internationally. The majority of sales are olive wood products (ranging from kitchen utensils to nativity scenes and ornaments), but other items include ceramics, blown glass, felt, kuffiya, embroidery, recycled paper, recycled glass, silver jewellery, olive oil soaps and mother of pearl. BFTA supports around 460 people through the producers themselves and their employees, as well as their wider families and community.

## **Olive wood workshops**

Through working with 48 family-owned olive wood workshops, BFTA came to understand some of the challenges these small and medium-sized businesses encountered when they tried to grow or develop. Accessing finance is one of the biggest challenges, leading businesses to work on an order-by-order basis and only able to buy materials once an order is received. This means that the businesses



Nidal Dakkarat working with olive wood in his family-run workshop.

can't take advantage of the fact that olive wood is both cheaper and of better quality when bought in the winter.

BFTA offered a micro-loan scheme, and 15 workshop owners were given loans to buy materials in bulk at the best quality and price. Having stocks of materials allowed the workshops to be able to fulfil bigger orders at shorter notice, and this has meant BFTA has been able to increase their orders and offer a wider range of products to their customers.

## **Nidal Dakkarat's success**

Nidal Dakkarat is a 30-year-old Palestinian Christian living in Beit Sahour. Nidal's father died 15 years ago, leaving him supporting his mother and sister when he was just a teenager. He started working

## **'I believe that fair trade can be a powerful agent to help us defy poverty'**

with olive wood during his school summer holidays and then after having to drop out of university for financial reasons, Nidal started his own workshop which now employs nine people.

Nidal began working with BFTA and received training in marketing his products and management of his workshop. BFTA also supported him with help on how to price his products to make sure he can make a profit. He is also now learning English through a course at the university, and uses his language skills to explain his business to tourists and visitors.

Last year Nidal received a loan of \$3,000 from BFTA. This helped him to buy raw materials in bulk at a good price and as a result he has been able to take on and fulfil more orders from BFTA. With this loan, Nidal was able to increase his total sales through BFTA by 54% (from \$19,733 in 2015 to \$30,493 in 2016).

Nidal said: 'I've been working with BFTA for many years now and they have helped me to sustain my workshop and provide both income for my family and employment opportunities to others in my community. I believe that fair trade can be a powerful agent to help us defy poverty, and the support of BFTA has also helped me overcome the challenges in my life. I am pleased that I can now do the same for others.'

## **The Palestinian economy**

The Palestinian economy is small and stagnant and relies heavily upon foreign aid and remittances as well as the Israeli and settlement labour market.

The Israeli occupation, now in its 50th year, imposes many restrictions which hamper Palestinian business owners. In addition, historically, Palestinian artisans have largely depended on sales to tourists and pilgrims visiting the Holy Land (60% of Bethlehem's population live on tourism-related income). Therefore, when tourist numbers drop due to spikes in the conflict or Israeli immigration policies, sales and income are seriously affected. In a country where unemployment rates are around 17.5%, rising

to 40% among under-30s, there are limited opportunities for finding alternative work.

This is why BFTA is so important. In the last six years, BFTA's sales have grown from \$100,000 to almost \$400,000 and they hope to continue this

steady growth. Their goal over the next two-to-three years is that there will be enough income from their company to support their development work through the NGO. Support from Commitment for Life and Christian Aid is important in working towards this independence.



The BFTA stand at a trade fair showcasing different kinds of Palestinian crafts and products.