

A SIGN LANGUAGE FOR DECENT WORK IN FORGOTTEN TERRITORIES: AN ADULT EDUCATION APPROACH



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The forgotten territories: Tekrouna

The Tunisian forest areas on the Algerian border are rich in plant species and aromatic and medicinal plants (AMP) that can provide original and varied substances, essential oils and aromas that are very useful for the agri-food, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries.

Despite the richness of these rural forest areas, the inhabitants, especially women, suffer from marginalisation, poverty and poor education, rendering these areas forgotten territories.

Investment in human capital and the development of natural resources is an unavoidable necessity to encourage the local population to participate in development and to act as active economic players for the improvement of their socio-economic living conditions.

According to a study carried out by the Agency for Promotion of Investment in Agriculture (APIA), several public organisations wanted to train these communities in practices related to Aromatic and Medicinal Plants (AMP). However, this requires a certain level of education equivalent to a minimum of six years of compulsory schooling. Even if activities are occasionally scheduled in their training structures, communities living in enclosed forest clearings cannot access them for reasons of distance, lack of resources and, above all, a level of education that is not adapted to the prerequisites of such training.

The majority of rural women living in this border area are either completely non-literate or have not completed



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Training session in open fields

their primary education. In both cases, they are unable to attend the training provided by NGOs which requires a specific background, and instead require training adapted to their needs which takes into account age, feelings of social exclusion, levels of impoverishment and other factors. The study carried out by Manai and Kilani (2019) focused on showing how, through the mobilisation of semiotic tools, Pierce (1978) was able to support a population of non-literate women living in a forgotten territory to build an appropriate language that facilitated the acquisition of professional skills relating to the distillation of aromatic and medicinal plants.

A new visual language for decent work

Outside their homes, in the fields, in direct contact with the plants, women were accompanied to the heights of the mountain where they learnt the techniques of gathering plants.

The training taught participants the correct way to cut branches without uprooting plants, and to work the soil around the plant to allow it to regenerate quickly and develop better for the next season. This method preserves the beauty of the landscape and prevents erosion and biodiversity, while ensuring a sustainable income for the women.

The trainer adopted participatory and interactive training methods aimed at supporting rural women with little schooling to acquire the techniques to distill aromatic plants in a way that adheres to commercial quality standards in the market. The aim was also to assist this community of women see the possibility of decent work in a forgotten territory.

Methodology

The participant group were women between the ages of 20 and 65 years. It was necessary to devise a means of communication that did not require writing or reading skills. To maintain motivation and avoid participants dropping out, the women needed to feel safe and able to learn and so the trainer created a common language based mainly on signs and symbols.

The most important aspect of this construction process was that the signs or symbols came from the learners/participants. No pre-established scheme was imposed because this would have no meaning for the participant group. After having constructed the signs and symbols related to all the steps of distillation, the trainer moved on to the validation of this language, which was co-validated in order to allow the anchoring of the learning.

The different steps of distillation were modelled by a system of signs and symbols that facilitated

understanding and exchange in order to achieve the following competencies (Figures 1 and 2):



Figure 1: Mapping of the work process by a participant

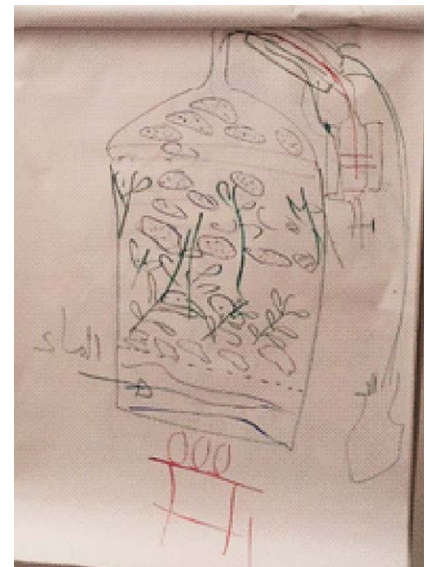
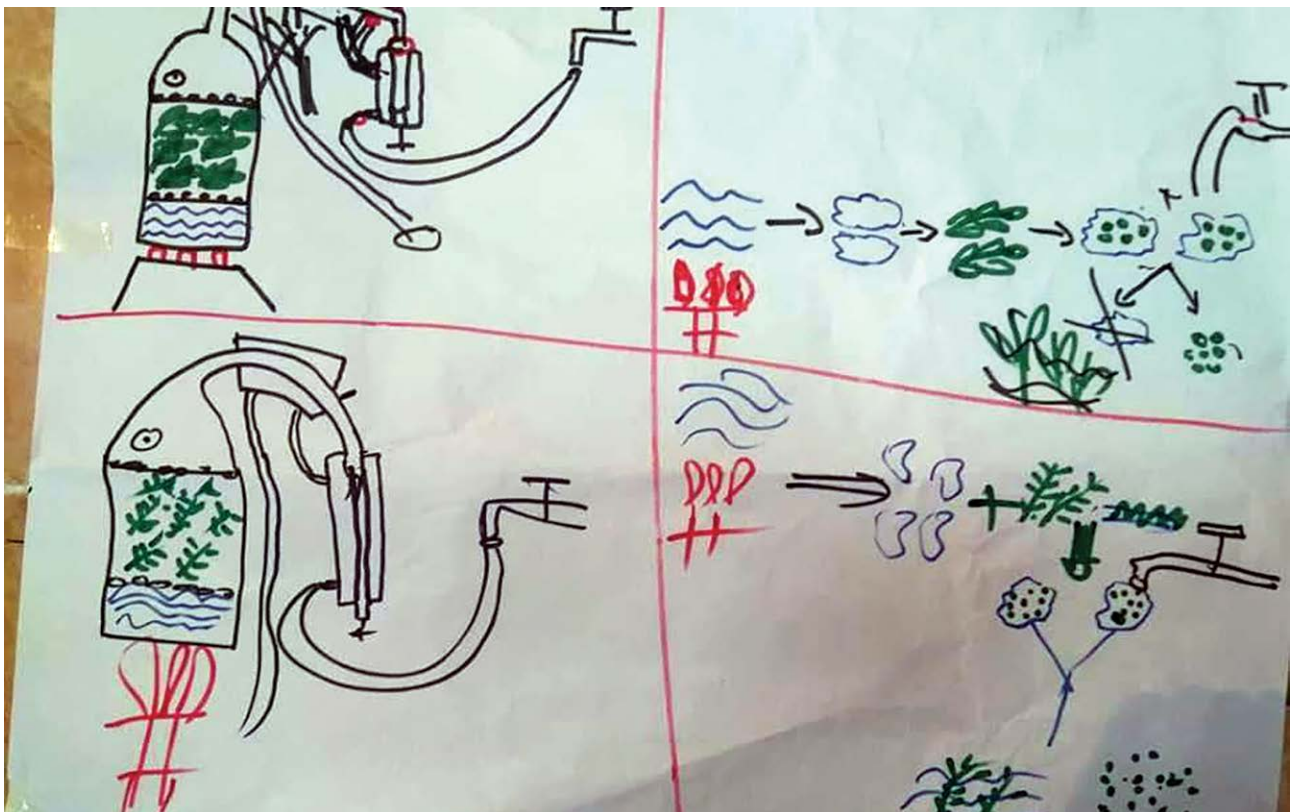


Figure 2: Mapping of the work process by a participant

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The common language co-constructed by these women during the learning phase enabled them to overcome the obstacle of non-literacy.



Modelling and conceptualisation of the distillation process

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After six months of training, the women of this ‘forgotten’ territory were able to give birth to their own produce: rosemary water and essential oil - a first step on the road to financial autonomy.

Following the training sessions, the women were able to better manage all the steps of the AMP distillation technique, as illustrated in the drawing. The common language co-constructed by these women during the learning phase enabled them to overcome the obstacle of non-literacy. Moreover, the co-constructed signs and symbols were the first steps the rural women took towards literacy.



Conclusion

Following the work done in terms of modelling, the learners were able to acquire technical skills related to the distillation of aromatic plants. They also developed theoretical knowledge about the phenomenon of distillation. After six months of training, the women of this ‘forgotten’ territory were able to give birth to their own produce: rosemary water and essential oil - a first step on the road to financial autonomy.

This experience has allowed the Tunisian research community in the

field of adult education, and with the support of DVV International Tunisia, to develop a new approach in non-formal adult education, based on activity and sign language: the semio-didactic approach.

References:

- Pierce, C.S. (1978). *Ecrits sur le signe*. (texts collected by G. Deledalle). Seuil, Paris. (Original text in French).
- Manai, M. and Kilani, C. (2019). *Analyse de l'activité des femmes rurales faiblement scolarisées: cas de la distillation des plantes aromatiques*. Master de recherche, Institut Supérieur de l'Éducation et de la Formation Continue, Université de Tunis. (Original text in French).