Off the Beaten Track
Implementing Community-Based
Tourism in Jordan
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Enterprise Development for Women and Youth in the Jordan Valley

MEDA’s Jordan Valley Links Project (JVL) is working with civil society and private sector partners to economically empower 25,000 women and youth in the Jordan Valley and increase their contribution to Jordan’s economic growth. Women and youth are supported with training and mentorship to improve their business acumen and are linked to markets where they can sell their products and services. The project works in three sectors: food processing, community-based tourism, and clean technologies. To increase access to finance, the project brings together Savings and Loans Groups, which are self-replicating, member-driven groups that meet regularly to save small amounts of cash which can be lent to members. JVL is building support for entrepreneurship in families and communities through role models, gender dialogues, and communication campaigns to promote the value of self-employment for women and youth.

JVL Learning Series

The JVL Learning Series is an ongoing initiative to share lessons learned as the project is being implemented. Topics include private sector engagement in Jordan, client experiences with savings and loan groups, effective strategies for enterprise development and measuring women’s economic empowerment.

Figure 1 – Overview of the Jordan Valley Links project
Tourism in Jordan

With numerous archeological, historical and religious sites, tourism is a major market for Jordan. In 2019, Jordan hosted 4.5 million international visitors, who brought in an estimated USD 5.8 billion.\(^1\) Despite regional instability, Jordan’s tourism industry experienced an average of 2 percent annual growth over the previous decade.

Most visitors to Jordan target well-known historical attractions, such as the Roman ruins of Jerash, the ancient city of Petra, and the Baptism Site. Tourists from the Gulf States often visit Jordan to take advantage of medical and commercial tourism opportunities. Alternatives to mass tourism are growing in popularity, with travelers seeking out community-based experiences, ecotourism and adventure tourism.

What is Community-Based Tourism?

Community-based tourism, or CBT, is an approach that empowers communities to create, plan and benefit from tourism. Emerging in the mid-1990s, CBT is tourism that is managed and owned by the community, for the community. It is a form of ‘local’ tourism, favouring local service providers and suppliers, and focused on sharing and interpreting the local culture and environment to visitors. Effective CBT can be commercially viable, as well as addressing social needs and contributing to building more environmentally sustainable practices. At its best, tourism can bring together people from different backgrounds and contexts. The Community-Based Tourism Handbook notes that tourism offers a unique opportunity to share perspectives and “first-hand experiences together and to develop personal relationships which can grow into powerful alliance contributing towards the sustainable development of society.”\(^2\)

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has devastated the tourism industry in Jordan and globally. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that the loss in global tourism revenues has been between USD 910 billion and 1.2 trillion, with over 100 million jobs at risk. In Jordan tourism constitutes 12% of the country’s GDP, and this revenue comes almost entirely from international visitors. With COVID-19 cases rising and falling in Jordan, global travel will likely be restricted for the foreseeable future.

The Jordanian Tourism Board’s website offers this hopeful message:

_While the world today is clouded in uncertainty, we believe in the allure of travel. Whether you have an upcoming trip, you’ve postponed your plans, or you’re thinking about a future journey, it’s still okay to dream. Jordan will be ready when you are._

(data from [www.unwto.org dashboards])

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1 World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), [https://www.unwto.org/country-profile-inbound-tourism](https://www.unwto.org/country-profile-inbound-tourism)

The JVL team works closely with Bookagri and Baraka Destinations, Jordanian companies implementing CBT in communities around the country. Though their approaches are slightly different, both prioritize ethical engagement with the communities in which they work, combined with a market-led approach to ensuring the tourism initiatives they support are viable and sustainable. Rudaina Haddad, founder of Bookagri, contrasts the experience of mass tourism, in which visitors “consume an itinerary” with CBT, which “provides authentic experiences that allow the engagement of visitors.”

Founded in 2016 by Rudaina Haddad, Bookagri connects local communities to tourists offering immersive and authentic tourism experiences to visitors. The company integrates family owned farms and microentrepreneurs in rural Jordan into the tourism sector by connecting them with international and local tourists. The company’s website allows visitors to select from a range of immersive and participatory experiences, including farm tours, cooking classes and handicraft lessons.

For example, in the Balqa governorate, Esraa hosts groups of tourists in her garden, where she teaches them to prepare popular Levantine dishes like zaatar, a dried spice mixture, and manakish, a traditional flatbread topped with oregano and cheese or ground meat. Nearby, Meysoun holds soap-making classes for tourists and also sells her soap and natural cosmetics to visitors. In addition to bringing tourists, Bookagri provides entrepreneurs and farm operators with technical support in understanding the tourism market and training in hygiene, customer service, product development and marketing. The company also acts as a facilitator, linking together the many microentrepreneurs to network, learn from each other, and even buy from and sell to each other.

With MEDA, Bookagri is providing more technical and mentorship support to local farmers, upgrading infrastructure on agritourism farms, and improving their website with an online booking and payment system. Bookagri is expanding its business to 12 additional farms, targeting villages in Salt, Jerash and Ajloun to become a hub for sustainable community-based tourism.

Baraka Destinations was created to partner with local communities in secondary tourism sites and collaboratively design and build tourism experiences that showcase their hometown to curious travelers. The philosophy of partnership is critical to Baraka’s approach: capitalizing on the strengths within the community, Baraka supports residents to build businesses that will provide viable livelihoods that are also a source of pride.

The company believes that sustainable tourism can stimulate economic growth while conserving and protecting cultural heritage and natural resources. Baraka founder and managing director Muna Haddad noted that visitors to Umm Qais tend to visit the town for only a few hours on their way to the more famous sites nearby. Local business owners were frustrated that Umm Qais sees relatively little benefit from the large numbers of tourists who pass through, as they rarely spend even a single night in the town. The company thus invested in building the supply chains and supporting service providers required to make Umm Qais a premier tourism destination, bringing economic benefit to the town’s residents.

With MEDA, Baraka has deepened its engagement in Umm Qais, by mobilizing the community around CBT, bringing together key stakeholders to develop a shared vision of sustainable tourism with a strong environmental focus. A longtime operator in Umm Qais, Baraka is trusted in the community and understands the business environment. Their workshops and mentorship on business and tourism skills have created strong local capacity, particularly among women and youth. A network of local businesses now provides a tailored experience to visitors, including homestay and gourmet meals. In addition, the company has curated experiences such as visits to beekeeping businesses and nurseries showcasing local seeds and plants.

3 For more information, please see Bookagri’s website at http://BookAgri.com/en and Baraka Destinations at https://barakadestinations.com/

4 Rudaina Haddad, Bookagri founder, in an online discussion from October 19, 2020.
Key Attributes of Community-Based Tourism

Though elements of CBT implementation can vary, the following core principles are common. Baraka Destinations and Bookagri’s approaches demonstrate the key attributes of community-based tourism:

- **Community development and local leadership:** Community members are involved in planning, decision-making and operationalization, which builds a sense of ownership. Sometimes a local organization or group mechanism is established to manage tourism in the community with profits and benefits shared equitably. Baraka and Bookagri have invested significant time and resources in engaging the residents of the communities in which they work, holding multiple community awareness sessions and prioritizing the participation of women and youth.

- **Building and investing in local businesses:** Local enterprises and service providers receive capacity building through training and mentorship. Both Baraka and Bookagri have provided training on business and customer service skills, as well as specific skills such as catering and soap making. In addition, both focus on environmental sustainability, supporting businesses to reduce waste and use energy efficient solutions.

- **Natural resource conservation:** Local organizations ensure visitors are able to engage with the environment in a sensitive and appropriate way that preserves natural resources. Funds are often set aside to protect land and habitats from commercial development. Bookagri’s research indicated that many Jordanian farms were being sold to property developers due to the challenges of earning an income in agriculture; agritourism allows farming families to diversify earnings and preserve valuable farmland.

- **Cultural preservation and learning:** In contrast to mass tourism, visitors engaging in CBT strive to have a more tailored, ‘authentic’ experience of life in the host community. Tourists can respectfully engage with the community while visiting people’s homes and communities to learn about their daily lives and customs. For many, this will result in a greater understanding of one another’s lives.

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Bookagri targets urban Jordanians from Amman, many of whom have lost contact with their rural traditions. The Bookagri team has found that the opportunity to spend time outdoors and engage with nature is even more appealing for city dwellers during the pandemic. Baraka promotes cultural preservation of a range of important traditions, including those around enjoying food: on one of their tours, visitors are invited into a local woman’s home and served a traditional Jordanian meal, while seated in a circle on the ground surrounded by plush Jordanian cushions and embroidery. When people are willing to pay for such experiences, local traditions such as handicrafts and cooking are more likely to be preserved or revived.

Steps in Facilitating CBT

Successful CBT requires a systematic approach that includes community mobilization, capacity building and support at multiple levels. Often, an external organization, such as Baraka or Bookagri, is the catalyst for initiating and supporting the CBT process, but ideally there is a high degree of commitment and ownership from the community at all steps. Key steps in the process can be seen in the diagram below.

Identification of community with tourism potential. An external organization identifies promising communities by conducting market assessments that pinpoint sites with tourism potential and identifies local organizations or communities that could implement a CBT program. Assessments should include analysis of gender and environmental issues that may impact on the types of tourism activities that should be promoted and which members of the community will be involved. Some groups, such as women, may need extra support to engage with CBT (see textbox on Women in Tourism).

Women in Tourism

In many parts of Jordan, it is considered taboo and ‘shameful’ for women to interact with men outside their families. Cultural constraints limit women’s ability to work in jobs such as those in tourism which require travel and nontraditional working hours, or contact/proximity with strangers. Many communities in Jordan maintain conservative attitudes toward women working outside the household, and do not consider tourism to be an appropriate working environment for women. As such, women are discouraged from working in this sector (From Vision to Reality: Politics and Gender in Jordan’s Tourism Sector, Ministry of Tourism, September 2011).
Community mobilization is critical and may involve several components, including introducing the concept of CBT to key stakeholders and raising awareness on the positive potential of such an approach. If there is sufficient support and buy-in, a local governing body can be established, ensuring equitable representation of community interests, delegation of responsibilities and mechanisms for distribution of benefits. Understanding and adapting the model to the different population segments and interests within a community is critical.

As noted above, Baraka mobilized the community of Umm Qais with a particular focus on engaging women and youth in new business opportunities. During awareness-raising sessions, they encouraged women’s participation through door to door invitations to the events, and featured women role models and speakers. Both Baraka and Bookagri have hired women staff who can better access and talk to other women in the communities. Both companies were founded and are led by women who are natural role models, showcasing how women entrepreneurs can thrive and innovate in the Jordanian tourism sector. To better engage youth, Baraka developed an “Innovation and Tourism through Sports Training” program, which helps young people to conceptualize business ideas and develop fundamental skills such as analytical thinking, teamwork, and problem solving.
Strategy Design. Successful CBT requires a clear strategy, which should be designed in close collaboration with the community. It includes assessing existing local assets, capabilities and gaps. Important areas to consider include sites and activities for tourists in and around the community, transportation options, accommodation and other tourism-related infrastructure. The strategy should identify capacities and infrastructure that require upgrading, including improved ICT and internet connectivity; improved infrastructure, such as hotels, restaurants, transportation and public spaces; capacity building on specific skills, such as guiding, hospitality, catering or associated skills such as hygiene standards; and provision of financial support and/or access to finance. Both Baraka and Bookagri focus on building the expertise of rural communities and turning existing activities, such as soap making and beekeeping, into viable tourist attractions.

“Working with Bookagri has encouraged women to work and overcome the local cultural notions that some work (tourism-related, engaging with others) is ‘not proper’.”

Meysoun
Small business owner
Enterprise and Skills Development. Investing in and building the capacities and assets of local community members is essential to implementing a successful CBT program. Bookagri and Baraka provide training on core business skills as well as on environmental stewardship and gender equality. For maximum impact, Bookagri and Baraka combine traditional training with one-on-one mentorship and targeted business clinics. Skills development includes guidance on best practices to reduce waste, such as using glassware in place of plastic tableware in restaurants, or how to cater for childcare needs of some women visitors. Enterprise development includes basic accounting for businesses, which is accompanied by access to capital. Baraka and Bookagri support the most viable women and youth entrepreneurs to develop a business plan and access start-up or expansion capital through the JVL project.

Market Linkages. Finally, connecting the community to markets is critical. Market linkages can facilitate the flow of information on tourism and tourist preferences. These connections include tour operators, tourist associations, input providers, vendors and tourists themselves. This includes the use of marketing tools such as tourism maps and itineraries through social media platforms and websites. Both companies have also invested in ‘exposure visits,’ whereby selected tour operators are invited to the communities in order to experience first-hand what they have to offer.

In terms of marketing, Bookagri’s website (Bookagri.com) links prospective visitors to a range of activities and experiences, allowing them to select and book online in advance. Baraka linked together multiple businesses in Umm Qais with a visually appealing one-stop-shop Tourism Map, essentially a mini-guide, which serves two purposes: firstly, it functions as a directory for tourists, providing them with a menu of local businesses and experiences to select from as they explore the town and its environs; and secondly, it is a platform for local entrepreneurs to network, cooperate and support one another.

6 CBT businesses were eligible for financing through the JVL project’s business plan competition. Please see overview of the business plan competition process: https://www.meda.org/jvl-business-plan-competitions
Figure 4 – Baraka’s tourism map highlights a range of experiences that visitors can explore and access, including restaurants, shops, services and tours of the surrounding area.
Conclusions

For MEDA’s first foray into the CBT subsector, we selected two innovative and successful partners which employ different approaches. Baraka and Bookagri have demonstrated how CBT can help implementers combine community empowerment, economic growth and environmental stewardship.

Though it is too early to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism industry at large, the sector has rebounded quickly from crises and disasters in the past. For example, Ioannides and Gyimóthy note the drastic fall and rapid rebound in visits to China following the SARS epidemic in the early 2000s. They acknowledge that COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented “global immobility,” and speculate that the tourism sector may return to the sustainable growth of the pre-pandemic period.

However, an alternative scenario is also possible, in which a more sustainable and resilient tourism sector may emerge. This could include smaller, more nimble, locally controlled companies that can flexibly and responsibly respond to market demands. The Transforming Tourism Initiative, a global network of NGOs, tourism practitioners and academia, echoes this sentiment, calling for a participatory and equitable industry that is in line with the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. In this context, CBT offers a sustainable model based on community empowerment, inclusion and equity. Though it is too early to conclude this definitively, MEDA is optimistic that CBT’s unique blend of community and economic development will be resilient in the face of the current pandemic. Bookagri founder Rudaina Haddad is optimistic: “COVID-19 has stopped the tourist flow to our three destinations in Jordan during the lockdown; still, after the lifting of the curfew, the tours to Bookagri destinations has doubled.” Baraka founder and managing director Muna Haddad takes a longer term view, but maintains a positive outlook for CBT: “The halt of travel has been absolutely devastating for us and our community partners, but it has given the world an opportunity to reimagine what the future of travel will be. The demand for human connections and meaningful authentic experiences is the most promising, and we are confident that the rebound of travel will be very much in our favour.”

9 Rudaina Haddad, Bookagri founder, in an online discussion from October 19, 2020.
10 Muna Haddad, Baraka founder and managing director, in an online discussion from October 22, 2020.
The results were inspirational. Our women partners now know each other and are now committed to our agritourism activities, which is very beneficial to all of them and to our tourism supply chain.”

Rudaina Haddad
Bookagri Founder
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