Kebili in the South of Tunisia is a region typically known for its date production. Ignited by her passion for interior design, Ahlem Chortani saw an opportunity in the recycling of by-products from these palm trees and turned it into an innovative business idea.

“When I saw palm waste lying on the ground I always thought, why not use it to create objects that are both decorative and also help protect the oases?”, reveals Ahlem.

After nine years working in interior design, as well as a degree in interior design and a master’s degree in design research, Ahlem felt ready to take on the challenge of entrepreneurship. In September 2017 she founded IMA Design, a company specialized in the creation of decorative objects made from palm waste, that mainly sells to individuals.

Before launching her business, Ahlem researched local artisan techniques to better understand how to work with palm wood and to get inspiration for her designs. She also visited the Kebili Business Center where she discovered Mashrou3i, an entrepreneurship development project, funded by USAID, the Italian Cooperation and HP Foundation, and implemented by UNIDO. After taking the HP LIFE e-Learning courses, Ahlem was invited to attend a 5-day Mashrou3i face-to-face workshop in Djerba.

“Mashrou3i and HP LIFE have been very helpful,” explains Ahlem. “Through the trainings I learned how to promote the value of my unique creations, to look for new markets and to choose the right partners to work with.”

“I also improved my managerial skills. Before the training I was outsourcing my accounting and inventory. Now I can do these things by myself,” she adds.

Ahlem is devoted to raising awareness of Tunisia’s rich cultural heritage and artisanal traditions. She has established a network of local artisans who provide carpentry support and hand-woven textiles for IMA Design’s creations. As the business grows she also plans to recruit a full time employee and move into a larger workshop.

“Palm wood fibres are very resistant, so you can produce durable items and sturdy furniture like chairs and tables,” she explains. “Our flagship products are trays and candlesticks which are made using traditional techniques. Each piece is unique and the motives are mostly engraved by hand.”

Ahlem is proving the tremendous potential and demand for Tunisian crafts. Recently she attended several fairs, including the national fair for handicrafts in Tunis, which has helped raise awareness of her products.

“Mashrou3i has been a great support. My sales are growing and I’m diversifying my products to attract new clients,” she says confidently. “In the future I hope to access export markets.”
The region of Gafsa is renowned for its phosphate-rich land and mining sector. However, a new generation of entrepreneurs, like Jamel Ounis, are diversifying the business landscape, highlighting the numerous investment opportunities the region offers.

Jamel is the founder of OXANSSE Gobelets, a paper cup manufacturing business. After studying automation and industrial maintenance he got a job at Tunisia’s leading poultry company. While working as a production manager in the packaging department of the firm’s subsidiary in Libya, he got inspired by the manufacturing of cardboard egg boxes and started thinking about setting up his own enterprise. In 2011, Jamel resigned and returned to his homeland eager to build his knowledge and skills in packaging production techniques.

«I made a list of four or five different ideas of packaging businesses and started to research which one had the most potential to succeed in Gafsa,” Jamel explains. “I conducted a study, looking at various things like the availability of raw materials and level of investment needed. Paper cups production came out on top so I prepared my business plan and submitted it to the bank for a loan.”

Jamel also managed to convince the bank about the potential of paper cup manufacturing and successfully obtained a bank loan of 134,000 Tunisian Dinars to purchase two key machines. OXANSSE Gobelets started production in February 2017 and a month later the budding entrepreneur had already won new clients and delivered his first order. During an entrepreneurship event in Tozeur, Jamel met an expert from the Mashrou3i project, funded by USAID, the Italian Cooperation and the HP Foundation and implemented by UNIDO. As part of deep dive business coaching Mashrou3i provides to strengthen start-ups in Tunisia’s interior regions, Jalel received several training workshops in environment, marketing, communication and access to markets. Through the training he strengthened his managerial skills and also created a business network which has helped find new clients.

«Mashrou3i is a great opportunity to create and expand your network of contacts, essential for any entrepreneur,” says Jamel. “Thanks to Mashrou3i, its easier for me to reach out to potential customers or deliver products. Whether in Tozeur, Kebili or elsewhere, now I’ve got a professional network for sharing contacts or solving problems on the ground.”

In November 2018, the project Mashrou3i also supported his participation as an exhibitor at the Agrimed trade fair in Sfax.

«Thanks to my participation in this fair, awareness of my business increased significantly and I won dozens of new clients across the country,” he says enthusiastically.

Attendance in Agrimed was a turning point for Jamel’s business, which is already attracting interest of customers in neighbouring Algeria and beyond.

«I currently have 3 employees, but after our participation in Agrimed, and with the new market in Algeria that we are going to export to soon, I plan to recruit more people in the team so we can increase our productivity.»
After a career break to look after her two children, 26-year-old Hajer Betoumi decided it was time to put her business plan in motion. The legal expert recently opened Kebili’s first real estate agency in the heart of the city’s dynamic commercial center.

With a degree in Law and Political Science, Hajer got the idea for her business while working in a local law firm where she specialized in cartography and topographic measurements.

“I got the idea of creating a real estate agency while talking with clients,” Hajer explains. “People who want to buy a house or sell land often don’t know about the legal proceedings to register these transactions. They also lack the guarantees necessary to carry out these deals with trust.”

“In the nearby city of Gabes, there are several agencies but until now no one was offering these kind of professional services here in Kebili,” she adds.

Real estate fraud and the risk of fraudulent transactions was another reason why Hajer saw a need to provide legal services.

“Some landowners sell their property illegally many times and buyers are often not aware of this risk,” she says. “I am here to enable full transparency of transactions.”

The first step on her entrepreneurial path led Hajer to the business center of Kebili. There she met an expert from Mashrou3i, an entrepreneurship development project funded by USAID, the Italian Cooperation and HP Foundation and implemented by UNIDO. During a Mashrou3i training session, Hajer discovered the HP LIFE e-Learning program. After taking the online business and IT courses, the aspiring entrepreneur attended a five-day face-to-face Mashrou3i workshop in Djerba.

“I was immediately struck by how relevant the training was to daily life as an entrepreneur,” Hajer says enthusiastically. “It immersed me in the reality of my project and enabled me to evaluate all aspects and financial issues related to getting the business off the ground.”

“Thanks to coaching from Mashrou3i’s experts, I realized that it wasn’t necessary to apply for a bank loan. Instead I was able to setup my office straight away using our family savings,” she adds.

Hajer officially opened her agency in December 2018, only a month after attending the Mashrou3i training. To spread the word about her business she prepared business cards and flyers. She has also hired an assistant who helps with all the administrative work, freeing up more time for her to focus on gaining new clients in the region.

With a growing network and loyal customer base in the region, Hajer has already established her reputation and built a solid foundation for business growth. Later this year she plans to attend a Mashrou3i communication workshop to help increase awareness of her agency through regional radio. Stay tuned!
Inside the kitchens of Mohamed Raouf Hizi’s bakery, we discover a hive of activity. It’s noon and a team of female pastry chefs is busy preparing orders that must be delivered in the afternoon. Behind the counter Mohamed Raouf’s wife and another employee are serving a steady stream of customers.

Located strategically on the main street of Kasserine downtown, Mr le Gourmand is always crowded with people. The bakery serves traditional cakes and sweet pies that have become hugely popular with the local community and passing travellers.

An entrepreneur at heart, launching the bakery was not Mohamed Raouf’s first attempt at business ownership. After graduating in Finance and Financial Engineering from the ESC (Ecole Supérieure de Commerce), he moved to Tunis in 2005. There, he gained strong work experience as a sales manager, security manager and co-manager. He launched several microprojects, including an interim company for cleaning and security, that enhanced his skills and also his entrepreneurial profile.

Despite success, Mohamed Raouf’s heart remained in Kasserine. In 2015, he returned to his hometown and launched The Information Hotel, a consulting office specialized in training, coaching and support in the development of business plans. In parallel he also engaged in volunteer work with youth in the region - a very active period that soon triggered the opportunity to set up his bakery.

With his experience as the director of a consulting office, Mohamed Raouf easily obtained a loan of 132,000 TND from the BTS (Tunisian Bank of Solidarity), which he supplemented with personal funds of 34,000 TND to equip the bakery premises in line with health and safety standards. In 2017, Mr Le Gourmand opened its doors, creating 14 full-time jobs in the process.

Aware of his business’s strengths and weaknesses, Mohamed Raouf welcomed the deep dive business coaching support provided by the project Mashrou3i, which is funded by USAID, the Italian Cooperation and HP Foundation, and implemented by UNIDO.

“The realization and success of the bakery has increased significantly by the support received from Mashrou3i,” explains Mohamed Raouf. “The deep dive business coaching enabled me to focus on areas the business was lacking. We received training in hygiene, as well as training in taxation which led to us recruiting an additional employee specialized in administrative tasks.”

Mohamed Raouf is currently expanding the business with the launch of a new cake brand. The entrepreneur is preparing everything from perfecting the recipe and marketing strategy to registering the brand and creating the packaging. “I’m targeting supermarkets in the west-central and bordering regions of Kef, thanks to my large portfolio of suppliers and my former contacts in civil society,” he says. “In the future, I can see myself leading and managing an international cake brand.”
In the middle of the countryside, just ten kilometres from the city of Kasserine, Ikbel Dalhoumi is busy out in the fields supervising his employees. One team is preparing land for planting fruit trees while another is installing a fence.

“The idea of starting a company that provides agricultural and gardening services was on my mind for a few years,” Ikbel reveals. “The experience I gained while working in a garden center and my network of farmers, entrepreneurs and local government convinced me there was a demand for these services.”

With its rich soil and abundance of water resources, Kasserine offers numerous agricultural investment opportunities and is Tunisia’s primary region for the production of apples, pistachios, prickly pears and tomatoes. More and more farmers in the area are launching agricultural projects and cultivating fruit and vegetables. Young people also want to tap into these business opportunities but often lack knowledge about farming.

Ikbel’s business idea started taking shape when he met an expert from the project Mashrou3i, implemented by UNIDO and funded by USAID, the Italian Cooperation and the HP Foundation.

“Mashrou3i support has been crucial for me,” he says. “The expert helped me to carry out all the administrative and legal steps so I could launch my business quickly and ensured I got off to a good start.”

Mashrou3i provided Ikbel with deep-dive business coaching and tailored support. After identifying the company’s management weaknesses, the agripreneur received a group coaching workshop on tax proceedings and a training in communication and marketing. To strengthen the workforce, Mashrou3i also trained Ikbel’s employees in the creation and management of green spaces.

“Now I have a clear marketing strategy and am gaining a large majority of my clients through social media,” Ikbel says confidently. “The workforce training provided by Mashrou3i has also enabled me to expand my service offering. This has brought new clients in Kasserine and other regions of Tunisia, like Douz where we recently completed a new green space.”

Alongside the preparation of land for farming and the creation of green public spaces, Ikbel’s business offers services in garden design and development, tree cutting and maintenance and the installation of irrigation systems. The agripreneur has also recently established a workshop in Feriana to produce reinforcement structures for fencing fields, which has expanded his customer base, especially in the regions of Nabeul, Zaghouan and Sousse.

“My business provides permanent employment to ten people,” he says proudly. “We already have many clients in Kasserine and across the country. Thanks to the support of Mashrou3i I feel optimistic about my business growth and future.”