



DESCRIBE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Title of the Story: Reducing poverty and empowering communities through tourism and handicrafts

Destination Name: Alay (Alay District, Osh Province, the Kyrgyz Republic)

Country: Kyrgyzstan

Submitter name: Imanaly Turkbaev

Email address: Imanaly.Turkbaev@helvetas.org

Position: Project Manager, the Swiss Small Business and Income Creation Programme Bai Alai Program

Submission category:

- Governance, Reset & Recovery
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

Find detailed instructions for submitting good practices in the Top 100 training module "Good Practice Story".

Should you have any questions on your submission please refer to our FAQ page or contact top100@greendestinations.org

Issues faced

Alay is a district in the Osh province located in the south-west of Kyrgyzstan. Alay district borders with China to the east and Tajikistan to the south. The area of Alay district is 6821 km² and the population is 91'876. Traditionally, the main forms of livelihood are based on livestock farming, hay making and primarily rain-fed agriculture. Cultivation of potato, barley and wheat provides only small surplus yields for selling locally. Poverty has been widespread in Alay, the cumulative percentage of poor and very poor in 2017 was 57%. The economy was largely subsistence-oriented. Substantial support to the households has been fueled by remittances from family members working in urban centers of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia. To reduce the impact of these issues, alternative sources of income and poverty reduction measures were urgently needed.





Being located in the mountainous valleys, Alay has a high potential of tourism development. Lenin Peak (7134 m) is the district's tourism hotspot which has been attracting alpinists from all over the world. The other tourist attractions are: Sary Oi Valley, mountain lakes, peaks, pastures and international Pamir-Alay highway (M 41) which was once a branch of the Great Silk Route – a major trading line of 7 thous. km stretching for fifteen centuries from Far Eastern China to Roman Empire. Besides, tourism of Alai is about trekking, mountaineering and experiencing the nomadic culture of the Kyrgyz people. Staying in a yurt, the nomadic home is an experience which more and more travelers are interested in trying. The road is picturesque with mountains (1560 - 5000 m) of different color, breath-taking passes and unique flora and fauna. Alay produces a lot of wool and traditionally, women would be busy with hand-weaving, felt-making, sewing, patchwork and knitting during long winters. Yet, these skills were seen as a leisure rather than an income-generating activity. Traditional handicrafts were disappearing with aging women. Tourism and handicrafts are very much interconnected; however, the functional links were missing.

Methods, steps and tools applied

In 2007 the community has come together to establish a Community-Based Tourism organization of Alay (CBT Alay) to develop the first tour products and attract visitors. In 2017, in consultation with the community, the district's and province's leadership, The Swiss Small Business and Income Creation Programme Bai Alai and the umbrella Kyrgyz CBT Association, CBT Alay developed a tourism development strategy for 10 years outlining the key development areas, SWOT analysis and an action plan. The strategy is in line with the national sustainable development agenda. As one of its development targets CBT Alay chose support to local women artisans in 2018. In parallel, the Business Women of Alay Public Union established by 10 women in 2014, with a mission to *support women in access to business information, know-how, and improving professional skills*, chose handicrafts to be the key development area in 2017. BWA started to actively cooperate with the district's administration and Bai Alai which provided financial, technical and organizational support. BWA worked on product development and packaging; integration of handicrafts in tourism; marketing; quality improvement; skill development; mentorship; training of trainers (TOT); business model promotion. BWA developed a unique *with love by Alay* brand which has been promoted since 2018 through networking, exposure to tourism and handicrafts fairs. This helped launch exports, like for example, shipping of hand-woven fabric made of organic cotton produced and certified in Kyrgyzstan. BWA got an order from the German Folkdays Company through an Osh-based Nomad Store. 88 women artisans involved in making yarn from bio-cotton, coloring and weaving were able to earn \$160 each in 2021. Partners are interested in sustainable growth of women entrepreneurs through producing not only cotton yarn and fabric but also the final products. BWA is actively partnering with tour operators, hotels, and shops. The initiative resulted in development of the new tourism experiences: master classes and showcases on handicrafts; demonstration of traditions and games. The price of mini tourism experiences varied from \$15 to 60 and income of women artisans was \$80-150 in 2019. To empower women artisans, a GALS approach (Gender action learning system) was used with 89 families. BWA conducts regular progress review meetings. Aside from its direct mission, BWA is a place for women to gather, exchange and unwind from daily routine.

Key success factors

The decisive approach by key stakeholders, CBT Alay, Bai Alai, and the municipality, to support and expose women artisans to working with tourists resulted in boosting the interest in products, they did not see value in before. Selection of handicrafts promotion by CBT – the key tourism sector player, served a solid foundation for





success. 42 trainings for 534 beneficiaries (80% women and 30% youth) helped improve business skills, craft-making techniques and marketing. The important success factor relates to the strong commitment of the women artisans to acquire business skills and promote their produce to tourists. Bai Alai provided USD 220 thousand for facilitation of women artisans' access to markets, business skills development and integration in tourism. To ensure sustainability, BWA applied the co-financing approach, i.e. women artisans' cost-share of 10 to 50%. Another important success factor was about engaging the experienced members in mentoring the new-comers who can also apply for small loans. BWA works on all levels: local producers, public authorities, tour companies, tourism associations and tourists. Working with tourists is not only about selling handicraft shows and souvenirs, socializing with tourists is a way of being exposed to other cultures. The support of the local municipality's leadership in addressing the legal barriers, disseminating information and coordination with the regional and national government bodies was crucial. BWA's strong role has also been in quality assurance, understanding of producers' challenges, preservation of handicraft-making skills through tourism and driving the mindset change. BWA leadership and members were quick and persistent in learning new concepts in tourism, marketing and business promotion.

Lessons learned

Tourism of Alay was perceived as mountaineering, trekking and sightseeing. The cultural component was missing. Women artisans were mostly involved in subsistence farming and deprived of income from tourism. As a solution, women were provided with skills and knowledge through 42 trainings and began selling their products. International bloggers and popular TV shows came to Alay in 2017-2021 to improve the district's representation in travel blogs with a special focus on sustainability and cultural experiences.

Cooperation between the value chain actors was missing, women were not aware of the business opportunities and did not see benefits in handicrafts promotion. Solution: an association of women entrepreneurs grew larger and chose handicrafts integration in tourism as one of the key development areas. Majority of the women producers considered handicrafts a hobby. Young women and girls did not see a benefit of handicrafts production. Ethnic clothing and accessories were considered as something that only grandmas wear on national holidays and family events. Solution: BWA did workshops at high schools and community events to highlight the importance of preserving traditions of handicrafts, explaining the meaning of national ornaments and nomadic philosophy. They talked about the employment opportunities in tourism.

In rural areas of Kyrgyzstan women often face problems with engaging in the activities outside home because of the perceived dominating power of males in the family. Solution: To empower and strengthen women artisans, Bai Alai supported implementing a community-led empowerment methodology to promote more harmonious and violence-free relationships ([GALS](#)). The success was in tailoring trainings to local realities and in involving both spouses.

Lowering interest in handicrafts entailed risks of the traditional dying and processing techniques being forgotten. Burning or throwing sheep wool away had an environmental affect. Solution: BWA organized public awareness raising on the advantages of preserving the old techniques with natural dyes instead of artificial coloring of Chinese origin. Today artisans use natural dyes from locally-grown wild plants, roots and flowers which makes their products demanded, healthy and sustainable.





The lack of entrepreneurship skills and business attitude among rural women artisans. Mindset shift and building skills require a gradual and patient approach. Solution and lesson learned: engaging more young and adaptive women proves to be efficient. Yet, the elderly women are great mentors and holders of traditional knowledge.

Women faced challenges related to the lack of preschools and/or could not afford paying a babysitter. Solution: BWA members have launched mini-kindergartens at their houses for baby-sitting each other's kids in turns.

Results, achievements and recognitions

Alay women artisans make demanded goods from natural materials. Exporting is done to the following markets: Europe 39%; USA 29%; Russia 13%; Kazakhstan 11%; Japan 8 %. The unique products of more than 10 categories with numerous subcategories are available. Accessories, for example, comprise Christmas décor, key-chains, jewelry decorations, toys, cosmetic bags, purses, cases for telephones and eye-glasses. All accessories are made of local materials: felt, patch-working, woven fabrics and wool. BWA works with 14 large buyers plus various online platforms. The online channels (40% of sales) are also popular among domestic and foreign clients.

Alay appears on blogs, reviews and publications. Tourists enjoy not only the nature-based, but cultural experiences in Alay. Felt-making, patchworking and other offerings coupled with interaction with the local ladies enrich the tourists' stay in the district and provide a good income generating source for women. The number of women benefitting from BWA's support increased from 10 in 2014 to 324 in 2021. The average age of members is 40 (28-65). Sales by BWA members grew from 0 in 2017 to KGS 317 000 (USD 4000) in 2021. The practice contributed to **poverty reduction in Alay from 57 % in 2017 to 48 % in 2021**. The women artisans of Alay have grown into demanded professionals to train peers in other regions. This is an additional income and a higher self-esteem of women who once were afraid of publicity. BWA has a financial and mentorship pool to help new members.

The unique Alay products are promoted as an interesting tourist experience with a careful consideration of the sustainability principles. We are proud that a small district has its own handicrafts shop in the capital. Alay is proud of conserving the national culture through popularization of crafts. *Kalyak*, for example, a special head decoration tradition was restored and families add kalyak to their daughter's dowry. Tourist numbers have grown from 4 to 16.5 thousand in four years. The average spending increased from 15 to 50 USD/day. Total sales by CBT grew from \$1400 in 2017 to \$3020 in 2021.

Gender disbalance was addressed and men became supportive of their wives' involvement in business. The example of BWA has been replicated in the neighboring Chon-Alay which recently opened a BWA branch. The key result is that poverty rate has been declining through engagement of women and providing them with income-generating opportunities in the handicrafts and tourism sectors.

Marketing of environmentally responsible products has added to the increase in sales. Wool is now a demanded product bringing economic benefits for local farmers and shepherds. In addition to the direct benefits, use of the natural inputs and dyes has become an interesting base for tour products in which locally grown plants or traditions of wool-cutting provide a story-telling content for guides and unique experiences for tourists.





Additional references

More info about our good practice story and the project

Video about the Good Practice Story <https://youtu.be/w8x8P4Stkio>

<https://we.tl/t-SJbwzHYAC4>

Good practice story – presentation recording https://youtu.be/Mai_z0_lgRw

Interviews with key stakeholders - women from Alay engaged in the project

(1) <https://youtu.be/Gvw8Eawc2VA>

(2) <https://youtu.be/B7GVI9SR2OE>

Alay's website <http://dmo.visitalay.com/>

By Alay brand's Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/by_alay/

Bai Alai project's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/baialai/>

Women producers of the By Alay brand: https://www.instagram.com/p/CajlM_1lgNS/

Business Women of Alay's presentation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vLpQmA9qcc>

Additional information about By Alay project: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1mxuLlqM_bnn-zAW5oJ20cBOeJ7MuOSIT?usp=sharing

Additional photos and videos:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pnoKtNcpl6niocnfjq7NyE6miXLFZA0e?usp=sharing>

More info about Alay

Alay featured in a popular Ukrainian TV Show "Oryol i reshka" (from 19:00')

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnNodviGeBQ>

Video about Alay region's beauty from Explore Kyrgyzstan team <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivsOdg8F-jo>

Article about Alay by a famous travel blogger <https://uncorneredmarket.com/alay-mountains-kyrgyzstan-trekking/>

Video featuring Alay's nature <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0XHzQ94-qs>





Video about Kyrgyz national horse and yak games festival, that is conducted each summer in Sary-Mogol village, Alay district, Osh region <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV88HvTUSns>

