Beyond Ephesus: A Living Culture of Production

Selçuk Ephesus Agricultural Development Cooperative, Türkiye
Izmir Metropolitan Municipality
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story

In Selçuk, home to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Ephesus in Turkey, women had long produced traditional foods like noodles, tarhana and tomato paste in their homes, but this labour remained largely invisible and disconnected from both broader markets and the millions of visitors drawn to Ephesus each year. Established on 11 July 2019, the Selçuk Ephesus Agricultural Development Cooperative brought women's household production under a collective structure, surviving the pandemic through solidarity, and took over Tohum Café within the Efes Tarlası Life Village as a meeting point connecting producers with visitors, while running vinegar-making, sewing and recycling workshops and joining festivals like EFEST to bring Selçuk's living production culture directly into the tourism experience. Products now reach local, national and international markets, giving members new income and greater visibility and confidence as active participants in local economic and social life. The lesson: small-scale producers achieve far greater impact working together than alone, and traditional production knowledge isn't just heritage to preserve — it can become a living economic asset that strengthens both local livelihoods and cultural continuity.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Located in the south of İzmir, Efes Selçuk is home to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ephesus and a history stretching back 8,600 years. While millions of visitors are drawn to

landmarks such as Ephesus, the Temple of Artemis, the House of the Virgin Mary, and Şirince, the district's true identity lies in its fertile lands, strong community bonds, and living culture of production.

For centuries, Selçuk's fertile soil has yielded olives, grapes, figs, peaches, mandarins, and many other agricultural products. Production is more than an economic activity; it is a tradition shaped by knowledge, labor, and solidarity passed down through generations. Women have long been the guardians of this heritage, producing traditional foods such as noodles, tarhana, jams, pickles, tomato paste, and vinegar.

Yet much of this labor remained invisible, and many women struggled to turn their skills into sustainable income. The Selçuk Ephesus Agricultural Development Cooperative was established to change this reality by empowering women, strengthening local production, and preserving Selçuk's living cultural heritage for future generations.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

For years, many women in Selçuk produced traditional foods and local products in their homes but struggled to access larger markets and generate sustainable income. Although they possessed valuable skills, knowledge, and production experience, there was no collective structure to support their participation in economic life or make their contributions more visible. This limited both women's economic opportunities and rural development.

At the same time, millions of visitors came to Selçuk each year to experience Ephesus, the House of the Virgin Mary, and other historic attractions. Yet the district's living production culture, local gastronomy, traditional knowledge, and the people who sustained them remained largely outside the tourism experience.

As a result, a new approach was needed—one that would strengthen women's role in the local economy, support sustainable production, preserve traditional knowledge, and connect visitors with authentic local culture. The need to make women's labor visible, empower rural producers, and safeguard Selçuk's living heritage inspired the creation of the Selçuk Ephesus Agricultural Development Cooperative.

The Vision: What you set out to do

Established on 11 July 2019, the Selçuk Ephesus Agricultural Development Cooperative was founded to do more than support the sale of local products. Its vision was to create a community-based model that empowers women, strengthens local production, preserves traditional knowledge, and keeps Selçuk's living production culture alive.

The cooperative aimed to help women transform their labor into sustainable income while creating opportunities to share knowledge, skills, and cultural heritage. Beyond production, it

sought to strengthen community bonds, encourage intergenerational knowledge transfer, and increase women's participation in social and economic life.

At the same time, the cooperative recognized that tourism could be a tool for local development. By connecting visitors with local producers, traditional foods, and everyday production practices, it aimed to showcase the living culture behind Selçuk's famous heritage sites.

Its ultimate goal was to bring together production, cultural heritage, tourism, and community solidarity within a sustainable model that generates direct benefits for local people and supports inclusive rural development.

The Journey: How change happened

The cooperative's journey began when women transformed the production they had long carried out in their homes into a collective force. The majority of members, who are women, combined their traditional knowledge and skills to produce a wide range of local foods and seasonal products under the cooperative's umbrella. Traditional products such as noodles, tarhana, tomato paste, jams, pickles, and vinegar, as well as unique regional specialties, began reaching broader audiences through the cooperative.

As women's knowledge was transformed into economic value, Selçuk's culinary heritage and production traditions also became living assets carried into the future.

Shortly after its establishment, however, the cooperative faced a major challenge with the outbreak of the pandemic. Despite the difficulties, women continued producing, and the culture of solidarity enabled the cooperative to overcome this period while strengthening bonds among its members.

Over time, the cooperative evolved beyond a production and sales organization. It became a living space for learning and sharing, where women exchange experiences, children discover local production traditions, visitors meet producers, and community ties grow stronger.

The cooperative took on the operation of Tohum Café, located within Efes Tarlası Life Village, a center dedicated to local production and sustainable living. More than a café serving local products, Tohum Café became a meeting point connecting producers, visitors, and the local community. Through collaborations with the Karaot Local Seed Association, visitors gained firsthand insight into local products and production traditions, while producers found opportunities to share their knowledge and experiences.

The cooperative also emerged as a key actor in local development through its educational and awareness-raising activities. Trainings, workshops, and hands-on events organized within Efes Tarlası Life Village and the Producer Market introduce both children and adults to local production culture, sustainable living, environmental awareness, and traditional knowledge. Drawing on the experience of cooperative members, vinegar-making workshops, sewing workshops, reusable bag production, recycling activities, and creative handicraft sessions help preserve and transmit traditional skills and knowledge. Participants not only acquire new skills but also gain a deeper appreciation of local production culture through direct experience. These

activities, particularly those enabling women to share their expertise, strengthen networks of solidarity and contribute to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.
The cooperative also participates in EFEST and various festivals, producer markets, and cultural events, bringing Selçuk's living culture closer to visitors. These encounters create direct interaction between producers and visitors while increasing awareness of the region's cultural values. Tourism thus becomes more than an economic activity; it becomes a tool that supports cultural exchange, social solidarity, and the visibility of local values.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
Today, the Selçuk Ephesus Agricultural Development Cooperative has become a powerful model of local development driven by women's labor.
Through the cooperative, women have gained access to new income opportunities, local products have achieved greater market visibility, and traditional production knowledge has begun generating economic value. Products now reach broader consumer groups at local, national, and international levels, carrying Selçuk's production culture far beyond the district itself.
The success achieved is not only economic. The cooperative has increased women's visibility in society, strengthened their self-confidence, and empowered them as active actors in local development.
Through activities ranging from Tohum Café and producer markets to festivals, workshops, and educational programs, visitors are able to engage directly with Selçuk's living culture. Tourism has therefore evolved beyond the simple visitation of historical sites and become a meaningful connection with producers, local products, and cultural heritage.
Today, Selçuk's story lives not only in the stones of Ephesus but also in the hands of the women who continue to produce.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
This journey has shown that one of the greatest resources for local development is the knowledge, experience, and solidarity of women. When supported by a shared vision and the right opportunities, traditional knowledge preserved through generations can create both economic and social value.

One of the key lessons learned is that small-scale producers achieve a much greater impact when they work together. Through the cooperative, women have increased the visibility of their products while building a strong culture of collaboration, learning, and mutual support.

Another important lesson is that production culture is not simply a heritage to be preserved. Traditional recipes, local products, and inherited knowledge can become living assets that strengthen local economies, support community well-being, and keep cultural heritage alive.

The experience has also demonstrated that tourism can be a powerful tool for connecting visitors with local communities. By engaging with producers and experiencing living culture firsthand, visitors develop deeper connections with the destination. For other destinations, the strongest foundation for sustainable development often lies in local people, local knowledge, and collective action.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Today, the Selçuk Ephesus Agricultural Development Cooperative is much more than a cooperative. It has evolved into a holistic model that supports women's empowerment, preserves local production, sustains cultural heritage, and contributes to sustainable tourism. Over time, it has grown beyond serving only local residents and has become a community movement that brings together visitors, children, families, civil society organizations, and public institutions around a common purpose.

Through workshops, younger generations are introduced to production culture, visitors experience local life, and women take on stronger roles in economic life.

Every production activity carried out within the cooperative today supports women's participation in economic and social life while strengthening Selçuk's production traditions, local values, and community spirit.

What was once invisible labor has become an integral part of Selçuk's destination story. It is a story that demonstrates how knowledge and solidarity inherited from the past can be carried into the future through women's leadership.

Awards or Certifications

Web Articles

https://setkop.com/hakkimizda/

Other Relevant Links

https://www.instagram.com/efeskoop/

Quotes or Testimonials

"We live in a city strengthened by the labor of women."

— Filiz Ceritoğlu Sengel, Mayor of Selçuk