



La Riojana - Fairtrade wine growers strengthening their communities

La Riojana is a co-operative, located in Chilecito, La Rioja Province, in Argentina and is the country's leading producer of Fairtrade, Organic and Biodynamic wines and olive oil. They were the first in Argentina and the third in the world to sell wine with the Fairtrade Mark. La Riojana is also Argentina's largest wine co-operative, with 280 employees and approximately 400 growers, 80% of whom own less than 3 hectares of land.

Summary

The isolated village of Tilimuqui in Argentina has seen wine workers and growers from La Riojana co-operative transform their community over the past 15 years by investing the Fairtrade Premium into local projects. It started with a water project to give access to clean, reliable water, then a secondary school and now in progress is a new local medical clinic. This is in addition to over 40 smaller projects proposed by the workers including provision of a community centre, recreation ground, computers, books and grower assistance such as composting, new tractors and irrigation channels. The community is now thriving thanks to the funding of these projects through the Fairtrade Premium as well as previous funding the Co-op provided as a bonus to support the work.

A video about these projects can be viewed [here](#).

"The new secondary school changed their lives and the entire dynamics of the village. The village has a new life and the children have broader perspectives." – Giselle Carril, School Governor



This case study has been developed with the support of Co-op as part of Co-op's 2024 'Treating People Fairly Awards' at which La Riojana was a Winner. The awards celebrate excellence in human rights practice, encourage suppliers to learn from each other and inspire new ways of mitigating current or future risks to worker welfare. Supplier entries were assessed by an independent, expert panel and awards were presented at a Co-op supplier event in May 2024. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to learn more about human rights at Co-op.



Taking action

Water

The water supply to the community was previously unreliable due to an old well that was not in good repair. In 45-degree heat on days when the water wasn't flowing, it meant they'd have to close the village primary school.

The **water project** was started in 2007, with drilling a deep well with two pumps, building a 150,000L reservoir and installing a 10,000L water tower. The water is filtered and is clean for drinking. This initial project opened the way for other projects such as the school and clinic, which both couldn't operate without a reliable water supply.

School

A key priority for La Riojana has been in investing in education to secure the future of the community. In 2010 a secondary school was opened for the children and grandchildren of the growers, as well as for children living in the local community. The project was voted for and agreed upon by members of La Riojana co-operative. Previously there was only a basic primary school in the village. To ensure its ongoing sustainability La Riojana has passed it on to the local university to run, which is now responsible for school equipment, the curriculum, providing highly qualified teaching staff, as well as the day-to-day management of the school including paying the ongoing costs of the teachers' salaries and building new classrooms.

There are now over 500 children aged 13-18 attending. It is the region's first pre-university technical college, and is focused on practical agriculture skills. The children graduate with a diploma as agricultural technicians, meaning

they are qualified to work in agriculture at 18. Since the school opened in 2010, improvements include the construction of extra classrooms to accommodate more pupils and the donation of 15 hectares of land by the local government, enabling students to carry out experimental and practical farming. Both school and university education are provided free by the Argentinian government, so these opportunities are open to every child. Many of the young people go on to continue education with the university, for example in winemaking or agricultural engineering.



Making an impact

By investing in building the school, La Riojana co-operative are not only providing high-quality education to hundreds of growers' children, who might not otherwise be able to attend secondary school, but are also producing the agriculturists of tomorrow, therefore creating opportunities for children to enhance their career prospects and have greater control of their futures. This is vital to the long-term sustainability and development of La Riojana as a business, with many school graduates going onto further education and some coming back to work for the co-operative. The school is also a member of La Riojana co-operative and sells grapes to La Riojana.

The school has had a profound socio-economic impact on the entire Tilimuqui community, a place that before the school opened felt itself isolated from the rest of the local region. Children, not just from Tilimuqui, but also from the surrounding villages and the town of Chilecito attend the school. The school has provided many jobs and there is now full employment in the village. It currently employs 60 teachers, 11 administrative staff and 12 maintenance personnel with many other jobs indirectly created such as drivers and kiosk owners. Its intake has gone from just 33 pupils in 2010 to 506 pupils in 2024 and so far, 488 pupils have graduated from the school as agricultural technicians.



"Ethical trade is all about partnership – the Co-op commits to long-term business and project support and La Riojana reciprocates by offering us first choice on their best wines. Together we are able to offer great products to the customer, creating a virtuous cycle."

– Edward Robinson, Wine buyer, Co-op

The government has responded to the success of the new school by upgrading the existing village primary school, adding more classrooms, proper toilets and a sports field and expanding it to also include a secondary school that is focused on accountancy training. The government has also paved roads and brought better street lighting and infrastructure to the village because of the increased flow of people travelling to the school.

Moving forward

Clinic

Previously there was almost no health provision in the village, just a health room with a doctor visiting once a week. Because of poor transport links, people weren't able to get to the bigger city hospital in an emergency.

In 2022 a new clinic was built a mile from the centre of the village, to cover all the nearby smaller villages. The land was purchased in 2017 very cheaply from a member of the co-operative. There are now professionals working there, offering counselling and therapy to adolescents and adults suffering from a range of addiction issues. The aim is to have a maternity clinic and paediatricians, and they are currently working to gain funding for staff and equipment. A foundation has been established and they are negotiating with the provincial government to ensure its sustainability. They are also in discussions with the local university to encourage them to offer a medical course and use the clinic as a location for clinical practice.

This is a leadership* approach because:

Proactivity

Seeing the need for good education to invest in the future of the community and the co-operative, La Riojana encouraged its members and workers to put a portion of the Premiums into the school, with a long-term vision for change, whilst also delivering smaller projects suggested by the growers.

Ownership

La Riojana has a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of the community, beyond the vineyards, with a long-standing partnership with this particular community. They have taken ownership of initiating and persevering with these projects, to see them succeed.

Partnership

The secondary school was a 4-way partnership, between La Riojana co-operative, Asociacion de Comercio Justo (Fairtrade Association), Co-op (UK) and the local university in Chilecito, Universidad Nacional de Chilecito. Partnerships brokered with the local university and provincial government will ensure that these projects can continue into the future.



Lessons learnt

- The project has highlighted the importance of partnering with local organisations and government to ensure a sustainable approach to projects, so that long-term running costs are not dependent on external funding such as Co-op and the Fairtrade Premium.
- At first the community expected to work with Fairtrade to meet their urgent needs and it was a challenge to communicate the long-term vision for improved education and health. The business wisely found a compromise by delivering many smaller projects suggested by the growers, in parallel with persevering to show the benefit of the long-term projects.
- Perseverance was needed, and a long-term commitment and vision with one community, to overcome the road blocks and obstacles.
- Ensuring the community is really involved at every stage and are bought-in to the projects has been key.

"Our advice would be to not embark on this process merely to occupy a new market niche, but with the genuine aspiration to change the internal philosophy of the company and ultimately change the lives of the workers and growers with the overall aim of improving the community as a whole in the long-term."

– Walter Carol, Export Director, La Riojana co-operative



*Key behaviours that Co-op champion in its supply chain are proactivity, ownership and partnership. Click [here](#) to learn more about Co-op's supplier engagement programme. Co-op's 'Supplier's Guide to Ethical Trade' sets out the standards suppliers are expected to meet.