Geneva Conference: FAO advocates for food security and agriculture to sustain peace

This year, Afghanistan's bi-annual Ministerial Conference took place in Geneva on the 27 and 28 of November. It was once again the occasion to look at the country's progress on reconstruction, with the goal to achieve self-reliance by 2024.

The two-day conference was hectic and packed with meetings, high-level speeches, and networking events. Many issues were discussed, ranging from anti-corruption to human rights to the sustainable development goals, and four side events were organized on topics such as private sector development, professional training for women, people on the move, and food security and livelihoods in times of drought, the last one being co-organized by FAO.

IN THIS ISSUE:

1. Geneva Conference: FAO advocates for food security and agriculture to sustain peace

3. The Director of FAO's Emergency and Rehabilitation Division Dominique Burgeon visited drought-hit areas in Herat

4. FAO observed World Food Day in Afghanistan

5. Five million sheep and goats vaccinated against PPR disease in Afghanistan

6. FAO established basic tools for the production of virus-free potato seeds in Badambagh

7. Households severely affected by drought received emergency livelihoods assistance in Afghanistan
In this side event, opened by Afghanistan’s CEO H.E. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, panelists from the World Food Program (WFP), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the Minister of Finance, H.E. Dr. Mohammad Hamaeyoon Qayumi discussed the devastating impacts of the ongoing drought in Afghanistan. While a broad range of topics relating to drought and food security were covered, the overall focus was on preparing for future droughts. With climate change, scientific predictions suggest Afghanistan will have more frequent and severe droughts (as well as flash floods). Panelists and participants, therefore, urged Afghanistan and its partners to prepare for this increased threat.

All agreed that water was a key issue. JICA pointed out its own significant and successful land rehabilitation and irrigation renovation projects in the country – some implemented through FAO. Other panelists praised this work and stressed the urgent need of similar works nationwide. Participants also stressed the need for increased dialogue about climate change in the country, as well as the need to better involve women in income-generating livelihood activities, so that communities would be more resilient to future shocks.

The Director of FAO’s Emergency and Rehabilitation Division, Mr. Dominique Burgeon, highlighted the critical role of agriculture in the country and emphasized FAO’s current and past support to enhancing the resilience of agriculture in Afghanistan to climate-driven disasters. He noted that creating and sustaining agriculture-based livelihoods not only provides food security, but also empowers women, and builds or sustains local peace. He also recalled FAO’s considerable support in building the country’s private dairy sector, rehabilitating and constructing hundreds of kilometers of irrigation canals and improving value chains for both small-scale producers and medium-sized enterprises. Following his recent visit to Herat, where he saw the impact of the recent drought on the agriculture sector, Mr. Burgeon said: “drought-hit vulnerable families have been forced to sell their oxen, on which they rely to plough their fields, which could have a devastating impact on the next planting season. We must urgently provide herds with animal feed to protect these livestock and safeguard food production”.

On the main day of the conference, opened by H.E. President Ashraf Ghani, Ms. Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett, Director of the FAO Liaison Office in Geneva, made a statement reiterating the importance of agriculture to the livelihoods and economy of Afghanistan. She noted the increase of disastrous weather events and emphasized the need for climate-smart agriculture and improved water management to achieve sustainable food security and peace in the country.

FAO’s presence at the event also came in the form of a booth in the exhibition hall. It was composed of illustrated panels emphasizing FAO’s messages on water management, empowering women through agriculture, and building peace through agriculture support, and featured products from agricultural projects supported by FAO in Afghanistan.

A communiqué was issued at the end of the conference together with the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework. As a major partner of the Government for the last 70 years, FAO remains committed to humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan.
In November this year, Mr. Dominique Burgeon, The Director of FAO’s Emergency and Rehabilitation Division visited Herat to assess the situation of vulnerable households and see the devastating impact of the drought. Alone in Herat, more than one million people are in desperate need of food, water, and shelter.

As part of this trip, he visited Kalar village in Injil district where tens of thousands of households are in immediate need of humanitarian assistance as the three years of consecutive drought has destroyed their belongings and left them with less to no food.

“I met with the vulnerable households who are badly affected by recent drought. I saw how they are suffering from this tragedy. The current situation has destroyed their livelihoods,” said Burgeon. “They are faced with the shortage of food and water. Their animals are faced with diseases and death, now is the time to scale up our efforts to meet the urgent need of these communities trapped in the middle of this tragedy,” he added.

He also visited Razeshk village, another area affected by drought. This visit was a part of FAO’s drought response, where around 70 vulnerable households received 100 kg of animal feed to protect their herds during harsh winter.

Livestock is a great source of income for the majority of households living in Herat. They use it for their own household consumption as well as for the market sale. A threat to the lives of the livestock is, therefore, a big threat to the livelihoods of the livestock owners. The recent drought has impacted a lot on the livelihoods of livestock farmers, forcing them to adopt negative coping strategies such as distress sale of their animals.

FAO is helping the most affected families to cope with the drought by providing the seed, training and equipping them with the required skills, and tools to get the best yield possible. This intervention will improve food diversity from the products from their own home garden and ensure the protection of livestock. FAO also distributed concentrated animal feed to feed animals during harsh winter.

FAO is supporting the people affected by drought in their places of origin to enhance their resilience to shocks and prevent further migration.
FAO observed World Food Day in Afghanistan

Food insecurity and malnutrition are major challenges in Afghanistan. The latest figures show that approximately one-third of all Afghans are food insecure. Decades of conflict, the influx of returnees, and natural disasters are all contributing factors. And this food insecurity is particularly pronounced this year as most of the country is suffering from a devastating drought. This drought is preventing farmers from growing crops, forcing pastoralists to sell off their animals, and resulting in large numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs), who are putting additional stress on an already-stressed food system.

In order to raise awareness about the continuing problem of hunger and malnutrition, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in close coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL), observed the 38th anniversary of the World Food Day with the aim of Zero Hunger by 2030. The event brought together over 100 participants from different national and international organizations, government departments, embassies, donors and local media.

H.E. Nasir Ahmad Durrani, the Minister of MAIL, remarked that “natural disasters, war, and a rapidly growing population are some of the challenges the country is facing in the fight against hunger. The journey to end this appalling reality is long and the struggle remains difficult. But with much-appreciated assistance from our partners and a steadfast resolve on the government’s side, we will prevail.”

H.E. Eng. Mohammad Gul Kholmi, the Minister of Energy and Water added that he “feels that the Government must create opportunities for greater private sector investments in agriculture, boost social protection programmes, link food producers with urban areas, and help smallholder farmers adopt sustainable agricultural methods.”

Mr. Rajendra Aryal, FAO Representative in Afghanistan said that “this year, World Food Day takes place at a critical moment in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. Hunger has been increasing for three years now. All UN Member Countries pledged to end poverty and hunger when they committed to the Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 2, Zero Hunger is still achievable if we remain jointly focused on this goal in the years ahead.” Mr. Zlatan Milisic, World Food Programme Country Director in Afghanistan echoed the sentiments of both Ministers and Mr. Aryal, and noted that “the root causes of hunger are diverse and investments across agriculture, rural development, social protection, and more are needed.”

World Food Day is one of the most widely-celebrated events in the UN calendar. It is organized by FAO country offices, national governments, and other stakeholders in over 130 countries across the globe. The theme for this year, Our Actions are Our Future: A # Zero Hunger World by 2030 is Possible, is meant to remind the world that Zero Hunger is possible if we join forces to apply best practices, learn from past lessons and use the best evidence available to design data-driven and locally-appropriate food and nutrition security solutions.
Afghanistan as an agrarian country is highly dependent on agriculture and livestock for its economic growth. It is home to a large number of herders. For herders, the majority of who are nomads (Kuchi), animals are the only source of livelihoods. Livestock and livestock production is crucial for sustaining the livelihoods of these herders as it is a great source of income, job opportunity, food supply, and soil fertility. Any kind of threat to the livestock is therefore a threat to the economy of the farming families as well as the country.

Out of all infectious diseases, Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR) is the most viral and highly contagious epidemic disease in small ruminants (sheep and goat), which is known for its high rate of animal mortality in Afghanistan. Every year, many livestock get infected and die by this infectious disease and this is because of the lack of awareness among the herders, poor vaccination and lack of control on the movement of animals, which further contributes to spreading the disease virus.

To combat against this disease, FAO through the Transboundary Animal Diseases (TADs) project launched a PPR vaccination campaign targeting five million livestock in 34 provinces in Afghanistan. This campaign started in May and ended in September 2018.

While livestock plays a key role in the households’ economy in Afghanistan, the campaign aimed to strengthen the food security of livestock farmers by improving the livestock health care system. This helped the sustainable livelihoods of herders cope with animal diseases, and help them avoid spreading of PPR disease through herds in commune border areas of Afghanistan and its neighboring countries. This campaign targeted only the animals belonging to the nomads (Kuchi) households, because these animals are highly in risk of being infected by diseases since the Kuchis are always on the move to find fresh pasture for their livestock. These regular travels from one place to another largely contribute to the outbreak of diseases into animals.

The campaign did not end here. Two million awareness materials such as flyers, brochures and posters were developed in local languages and distributed to the Kuchi communities to improve their awareness on animal health diseases as well.

Since 2015, the TADs project has vaccinated over 12 million small ruminants (sheep and goats) against the PPR, which helped the Afghan herders control the outbreak of this endemic disease.

As a result, in those areas where the vaccinations were implemented, the level of diseases has been reduced, and there has been no report on the outbreak of the diseases from the livestock owners in the targeted area.
Potato is one of the most important vegetable crops in Afghanistan. It is considered of more nutritious compared to wheat, rice, and corn. In recent years, potatoes are one of the key products for eliminating malnutrition in developing countries.

Afghanistan’s climate condition is very suitable for potato production. Potato is cultivated in most provinces of the country, but is concentrated in the central region such as Bamyan. According to the World Agriculture Information Network report released in 2014, the average production of potatoes in Afghanistan is 13.5 tons per hectare. The main causes for this could be the lack of certified potato seeds, the use of traditional cultivation practices and lack of proper storage of potato seeds.

FAO Afghanistan, under a project funded by the government of Japan, has successfully established the basic facilities including tissue culture laboratory, greenhouses, irrigation system and cold storage in Badambagh of Kabul to promote the production of high-quality virus-free potato production.

How does the project work?

The project has established a tissue culture laboratory and equipped it with the necessary tools and facilities to produce initial planting seeds that are free from viruses. It also trained a number of laboratory technicians with the required capacity to carry out the tissue culture operation and produce breeder seed of the potato varieties that are most accepted in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the project has also established the greenhouses in which the plantlets produced from the tissue culture can grow in a protected environment under septic and regulated climatic conditions. The project has introduced modified greenhouses that make it very convenient for the rapid growth of potato plantlets.

In Afghanistan, potatoes are planted during spring and fall seasons and seed potato needs to be stored at least for 6-8 months. The existence of cold storage plays a significant role in linking the tissue culture laboratory with the seed multiplication in the field. Given the importance of the cold storages, the project has also constructed a cold storage of 20 MT capacity which allows the potato seeds to stay for a longer time without being spoiled.
Afghanistan is suffering from its worst drought in recent history, putting millions of people towards food insecurity and hunger. Over 9 million people are estimated to be in need of food security assistance in 22 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.

Below average precipitation during last winter season, specifically during the plantation period severely affected the livelihoods of Afghan farmers causing poor agricultural production and leaving them with little to no food for their families.

The western region has been worst affected by the current drought. Poor harvest and dried pasture resulted in an increase of animal feed prices causing serious damage to animal health, productivity and selling price. Labor wage sector was also compromised as most of the local labor was employed in the agriculture sector. These conditions resulted in massive asset depletion, food insecurity, and migration.

With the financial contribution of the donor agencies, FAO has so far reached to more than 41,000 vulnerable families (292 838 people) in the most affected parts of the country affected by drought. FAO overall drought response plan is targeting 1.4 million farmers and appealing for around 30 million USD to scale up its emergency assistance to worst affected provinces.

Increase in production or increase in cultivation depends on the availability of crop inputs to the farmers. According to the Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) 2018 findings, almost 69% of the farmers lack access to certified seed for cultivation and are unable to afford quality fertilizers. Livestock support is also critical as farmers are unable to afford high animal feed prices during the winter.

FAO is on the ground supporting the most vulnerable farmers with agriculture inputs such as certified wheat seed, fertilizers, and vegetable kits on time for the main planting season starting from October 2018 till February 2019 to most vulnerable farmers in 22 worst affected provinces. It is also targeting vulnerable pastoralists for livestock protection inputs and services, to ensure that concentrated feed is available to feed animals throughout the winter months. To ensure the animal health, FAO also conducted a nation-wide vaccination campaign for Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR) and Foot-and-Mouse Diseases (FMD) in 2018 that covered over 5 million small and large ruminants.

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