Danish Ambassador and Norwegian Minister Counsellor visit drought-affected farmers in Herat

On 29 May 2019, H.E. Nikolaj Hejberg, Danish Ambassador to Afghanistan, and Mr. Johnny Almestad, Norwegian Minister Counsellor to Afghanistan joined Rajendra Aryal, FAO Country Representative for the ceremonial handover of livestock inputs to drought-affected farmers in Herat. The ceremony took place at the Provincial Directorate of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (PAIL) in the presence of PAIL Director, Mr. Abdul Saboor Rahmany and the national media.

The visiting delegation also interacted with the project beneficiary farmers from Ghoryan, Kushk Kohna, Kohsan and Gulran districts in Herat and took stock of the impact of drought on their livelihoods and their needs.

"Addressing the needs of Afghan farmers is our first priority. The Government of Denmark is committed to supporting farmers and specifically the agriculture sector," said H.E. Hejberg, Danish Ambassador in Afghanistan.

After three years of back-to-back failed rains, Afghanistan was faced with a devastating drought that witnessed failed crops, livestock deaths, dried up pastures and migration of farming families. Fortunately the country experienced good precipitation last winter that has allowed the return of farmers to their places of origin and resume their agriculture-based livelihood activities, however the impact of the drought was significant. Continuous support is still required to help the most affected people get back on their own feet.

The delegation also paid a courtesy call on the Governor H.E. Abdul Qayum Rahimi in his office. Discussions were held on the challenges and opportunities for the agriculture sector in Herat, and the best possible ways to strengthen the partnership to support the agriculture sector in Afghanistan.

The distribution was a part of a larger Denmark-funded project to support more than 35,000 vulnerable farming families in Badghis, Daikundi, Ghor, Helmand, Herat and Kandahar provinces that were most affected by the drought. Families in the six provinces will benefit from the provision of concentrated animal feed, fodder crop seed, deworming medicine and trainings.

FAO helps drought-affected farmers in their places of origin with the aim to prevent further migration in larger cities which directly affects the socio-economy affairs of people in cities.

"We have received some support but the impact was huge. We need more support to get back to our normal lives. Before the drought, I had 50 livestock, but now it is reduced to five because all of them died," said one of the beneficiaries that attended the ceremonial handover.
The Ministry for Energy and Water (MEW) presented the FAO Representation Office in Afghanistan with an award for its “excellent work in developing and managing the water sector in Afghanistan.”

The award was presented to the FAO Country Representative Rajendra Aryal by the Acting MEW Minister, Mohammad Gul Khulmi, and Deputy Minister Khan Mohammad Takal, on the second day of the National Water Conference on Water Resources Development and Management. The conference examined recent achievements by the government and other stakeholders in water management.

This water management conference was the fifth annual such conference. Each year since its inception, the conference provides a platform for discussing progress and continuing needs in the water sector in Afghanistan. It brings together scientists, policy makers, engineers, civil society actors, Islamic scholars and social scientists involved with the water sector and its sustainable development and management.

This year, the conference began with a set of keynote speeches, including one from the Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan, H.E. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Acting MEW Minister, Mohammad Gul Khulmi and the Deputy Director General of Policy at the National Environmental Protection Agency, Mr. Idrees Malyar. Keynote speeches noted the progress that had been made rehabilitating and extending canals, and improving on farm water management. However, the bigger focus of these talks was on future needs: droughts, like the one of 2018 were going to become more frequent, climate change was making water availability more unpredictable, and aquifers, like those under the city of Kabul, are becoming dangerously depleted due to poor water use and growing populations.

Upon receiving the award, the Mr. Aryal thanked the Ministry on behalf of all of FAO Afghanistan, and especially the water sector staff.

He acknowledged that improved water resources management and water storage capacity continue to play a central role in the economic growth of the country and eradication of poverty. “Because of climate change and its severe heat and drought impacts on Afghanistan, the water sector needs a lot of attention – more than at any other time,” Mr. Aryal said. “FAO is focused on expanding and diversifying its' work in this area in the future, in close collaboration with the Government of Afghanistan, donors and other relevant stakeholders.”

Water sector development in the past 20 years has focused most heavily on river bank protections, rehabilitating and adding canal infrastructure, and building and rehabilitating small and large dams. However, those in the water sector know that due to climate change and a burgeoning population, water sector efforts will have to both diversify and rapidly speed up. Recently opened and ongoing FAO irrigation projects are trying some of these diversified techniques, including land channeling to effectively capture surface water, timed and drip irrigation systems on farms to minimize water use, and water collection ponds and storage tanks. FAO Afghanistan is also planning future projects that focus on whole watershed management in order to more effectively use funds and build synergies between activities.

In the near future, aquifer replenishment, in places like Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and other large urban centers will be an issue that needs to be tackled by FAO and its’ partners in the water sector. New technologies that can literally pull water out of the air have been showing promise in other desert countries and may be useful for Afghanistan as well. However, no matter what methods are used, it is clear that Afghanistan faces some very dry decades ahead unless water management is prioritized by all those invested in Afghanistan’s future.
Empowering women to improve their livelihoods in Afghanistan

"Now not only have I managed to support my family economically but have also gained many life skills that has assisted me to generate income, educate my children and help them have a better future". Mushtari Hesari is a mother of four children and lives in Parwan province. She believes that if she can be a self-sufficient woman, others can be too. This is actually then us who should provide the opportunity for women like Mushtari to grow.

Women account for 50 percent of Afghanistan’s population, yet their participation in socio-economic affairs is negligible. Women are not fully involved in many affairs due to cultural issues, lack of literacy and lack of awareness on the standard methods of food production. Mushtari believes that if better opportunities are provided to women, they can be considerable support to the households’ economy.

Mushtari lives in a place where women are rarely involved in making decisions about their life and their future. And economically, they are very much dependent on the male members of the family. However, Mushtari as an educated woman graduated from the faculty of literacy always thought of improving the lives and livelihoods of the women in her community. This made her decide to take further step and do something for the women in her community.

Before joining FAO training, Mushtari was running a literacy class where she was teaching basic reading and writing skills to the women of her society, however that was not enough to bring changes in the lives of other women.

Mushtari then attended a five-day FAO training course on the establishment of dairy cooperatives, cattle management and good agriculture practices. She then became an active member of the Integrated Dairy Scheme (IDS) project and started her work as a field women trainer in 2014. She then also had a chance to participate in an exposure visit to India that further supported her to expand her knowledge.

After completing the training, Mushtari started transferring her knowledge and experience to other women in the community. At the beginning it was very difficult for her to convince the families of women to allow them to attend training classes, however as time passed on, people in the community realized her honest service. They realized that creating opportunities for poor women can help them have sustainable income sources and improve their livelihoods.

Thanks to the IDS project, Mushtari proudly says nowadays that she has managed to train more than 1000 women in cattle management and good agriculture practices she has also formed Self Help Groups (SHG) with the aim to build the financial capacity of these women and generate income at the community level. Through these groups, poor and marginalized women get together, help each other and solve their individual problems. They have also set up their group saving boxes, where they collect and save their money and use it at the time of need or when they want to start a small business. Mushtari has managed to establish 54 women SHGs across Parwan, consist of 20-25 members per group on average.

"The women in these groups have their vegetables and milk to sell and generate income. This has helped them support their families and send their children to school", says Mushtari proudly. These women are also selling their homemade products in local markets and at exhibitions, and generate additional income.

Mushtari has become a role model to many other women who want to do something with their lives as well as contribute to the sustainable livelihoods in the country.

Making its mark –FAO and EU support the development of Afghanistan’s first Geographical Indication System

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the European Union (EU) have joined forces to support the development of the first ever Geographical Indication (GI) system in Afghanistan.
Thanks to this new agreement, the Afghan Government will be able to set up a national GI system. Such a system will allow increasing the income of smallholder producers and agribusinesses in the prioritized GI value chain.

The joint FAO-EU support will be provided in two phases. This first phase will involve a series of interventions regarding GI legislation, policies, capacity development, product identification, control, quality assurance, verification and certification. The second phase of the project, which is expected to begin in 2020-2021, will focus on increasing the income of smallholder producers and agribusinesses through the development of two pilot GI value chains, improved market access and increased recognition of Afghan GI by consumers.

A Geographical Indication (GI) is a name or sign used for certain products which corresponds to a specific geographical location or origin (e.g. a town, region, or country). Examples are Champagne which can only be labelled as such if the grapes were grown in the area of France bearing the same name, or Darjeeling Tea which can only be grown in the Darjeeling district in West Bengal, India. The use of a GI acts as a certification that the product possesses certain qualities, is made according to traditional methods, or enjoys a certain reputation, due to its geographical origin.

“This project will bring profitable income to the rural areas. Today our main problem is the lack of access to the regional and international markets, and this is due to the low awareness of the people and non-standard methods of the processing and packaging of the products. This new project undoubtedly will be a new opportunity to the Afghan products”, said H.E. Naseer Ahmad Durrani, MAIL Minister.

“Through its support to agriculture, the EU is committed to contributing to the improvement of rural livelihoods, food security and farm incomes, and thus to the overall economic development of Afghanistan. This project will support Afghan farmers by recognizing the high quality of their produces and thereby fostering market opportunities, said Pierre Mayaudon, Ambassador and Head of EU Delegation, at the signing ceremony of the project.

“Afghanistan is known for its long historical heritage and it has a large number of food and agriculture products, handicrafts and precious stones, among others, that can easily qualify for GI and significantly increase their value and markets within and outside the country”, said Rajendra Aryal, FAO Representative in Afghanistan.

The project will be implemented under the leadership of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL) and in close collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI) with technical support by FAO. The project is funded by the European Union (EU).

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**Improving food security and nutrition in Afghanistan to achieve the objective of Zero Hunger**

A delegation of high-level government officials and members of the Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda (AFSeN-A) participated in a training on policy change analysis in agriculture food security and nutrition in India.

The training focused on using the Kaleidoscope model to examine the evolving of food policies to address the issues of food security and nutrition, and gauge the progress towards meeting desired objectives and goals at the national and subnational level. It was a six days training that was mainly organized for the officials of the government of Afghanistan that provided a platform for them to improve their capacities to conduct an analysis of policy alternatives facing the food, agriculture and natural resources sectors for evidence-based policymaking.

The delegation from Afghanistan was led by H.E. Nasrullah Arsial General Director of Council of Ministers and attended by representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL), Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), Civil Society Organizations (CSO) members, Ministry of Economy (MoEC), Ministry of Commerce and Industries (MoIC), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Afghanistan and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) jointly organized the training under the Food and Nutrition Security Impact, Resilience, Sustainability and Transformation (FIRST) Programme with the support of the European Union.

FIRST is a partnership programme between the European Union and FAO. FIRST provides governments in over 30 countries with policy assistance and capacity development support to review current policy and institutional frameworks for food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture.

Mr. Tomio Shiciri, FAO Representative in India highlighted the importance of prioritization and implementation of policies guided by nationally specified needs and urgencies and subsequent allocation of resources to the development interventions. Ms. Mehnaz Ajmal Paracha, policy officer of the FIRST programme, while explaining the environment of food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture in Afghanistan, emphasized on creating enabling environment for implementation of policies, and building the institutional and human capacities.

Dr. Shahid ur Rashid, Regional Director of Asia – IFPRI, welcomed the Afghan delegates and expressed the interest in laying the foundation of IFPRI’s work in Afghanistan in collaboration with FAO mainly in the policy arena in food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture.

This training has enabled the participants with enhanced skills and know-how to be able to develop an in-country policy analysis environment with the full understanding of the policy process, concepts of policy analysis, identify gaps and suggest policy changes that could be helpful in better service delivery and effective resource
Since its inception two years ago, the “Strengthening Afghanistan Institutions Capacity for Assessment of Agriculture Production and Impact Scenarios Development” project has worked to build the capacity of government institutions to create, manage, and use agricultural data. While the idea behind it may sound simple, good data and proper use of that data is essential for making good decisions in any field. And after four decades of war, the institutions of this agrarian country are not always as well-equipped as they should be with such data.

The project, like all FAO Afghanistan projects, was designed in response to institutional capacity building priorities outlined in Afghanistan’s National Comprehensive Agriculture Development Priority Programme (2016 – 2020). Goals of the program ranged from developing new tools for agriculture monitoring, to outlining procedures for monitoring natural hazards and water scarcity to providing technical support to Afghan institutions to generate agriculture statistics and use data for sustainable land-use planning and natural resources management.

Monitoring, analysis, and better data are bringing better agriculture to Afghanistan

Soil suitability for specific crops, based on seven major soil qualities was assessed, and agro-climatic yield simulations for historical climate and future climate scenarios was completed for 24 major crops. All results were based on soil mapping units of the Harmonized World Soil Database and United States Geological Survey (USGS) and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) soil data sets, ensuring the results met international quality standards. Finally, production costs and possible net revenues under rainfed and irrigated conditions were estimated on crop-by-crop basis.

Under another project component, climate change scenarios on water availability, crop yields and socio-economic factors for all major agro-ecological zones were completed, and evidence-based adaptation strategies for the agriculture and natural resources sectors were developed. Results unsurprisingly showed that climate change will have impacts, largely negative, and driven by increases in heat and decreases in water availability. However, though negative, the results can be used as a basis for capacity-building programs, so that a cadre of national climate change and agricultural modeling specialists can be grown.

Remote-sensing, using satellites, drones, and other airborne technology is the way of the future in land use monitoring, especially in a country like Afghanistan with difficult and dangerous terrain. Therefore, the third component of the project has been working using updated technology for agriculture monitoring, including remote sensing methods and geographical information systems (GIS). For example, the rice and cotton crop area was estimated for 2017 using these methods. And, approximately 90 survey staff from the Management Information System (MIS) and Statistics directorates of DAILs in 65 districts have been trained on data collection and the Land Resources Information Management System (LRIMS) in Cairo. These staff also received training on the use of GIS and remote sensing technologies, mobile computing, mapping and analysis of specific crops, crop modeling concepts, statistical analysis, and how to use LRIMS/NAEZ to plan land use and water interventions.

To ensure multi-sectoral policies are in line with Afghanistan National Development Framework (ANPDF), and the National Priority Programmes (NPPs), as well as to address the need of vulnerable communities related to food security and nutrition and sustainable agriculture across the country, an extensive policy gap analysis will be carried out by trained government officials to formulate a nutrition-sensitive food system policy for Afghanistan.

FAO and IFPRI reaffirm their commitment to strengthen the strategic partnership between FAO, IFPRI and the government of Afghanistan in the food and nutrition security policy arena in Afghanistan to achieve the ultimate objective of zero hunger.

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New in-country animal feed laboratories mean quicker processing at reduced costs

An animal feed testing laboratory was recently built within the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock’s General Directorate of Animal Health and Livestock. With the support of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) through a South-South Cooperation with Thailand, the lab will be strengthened for the development of improved fodder and quality testing of concentrated animal feed against several parameters – from chemical toxins to nutritionally important considerations, such as oil, protein, fibre etc.

“Livestock is a key source of food and livelihood for rural Afghan households, and access to quality feed fundamentally influences animal productivity, health and welfare. Therefore, keeping livestock healthy by ensuring good quality feed to those that need it most is one of our main priorities,” said Rajendra Aryal, the FAO Representative in Afghanistan. Experts from Thailand will provide technical support by undertaking a comprehensive needs assessment to determine the required investment (i.e. equipment, capacity and cost).

Three privately owned feed analysis labs were also established in Balkh and Kabul provinces for quality control of animal diets and pre-mixes produced. The labs are the first of their kind in Afghanistan to test against aflatoxins – a naturally poisonous substance that can contaminate food crops and pose a serious health threat to livestock and people. Additionally, the private labs provide physical and chemical feed testing services not limited to livestock and poultry feed, but also of cereal and oil crops for a vast list of clients, including local producers, FAO and agencies alike.

The lack of such facilities in Afghanistan in the past meant FAO had to ship samples abroad for testing, which resulted in processing times of up to a month and at steep prices. Improper storage units during transport or unnecessary delays would sometimes result in quality deterioration of feed. “Transporting and testing samples outside of Afghanistan takes around 25-30 days, not including transport delays and detainments during customs that could typically range from seven to 10 days,” said Ahmad Zia Aria, Regional Coordinator of FAO Mazar, in Afghanistan. “This causes serious input distribution delays.”

With the establishment of the new labs in Afghanistan, the process is quick and cost-effective. The labs have the capacity to provide test results of 150 to 200 different types of samples within three to five days. This allows FAO to reach those most vulnerable fast. “Effective in-country laboratory facilities help promote the use of locally available feed resources. Without quality feed, many farmers may ultimately lose their main source of livelihood,” Aryal emphasized.

As part of its Emergency Livelihoods Response Plan, FAO requires USD 35 million to assist 1.4 million people in Afghanistan to restore livestock production, improve their food security and prevent recovery setbacks.

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