



FAO and China put efforts to support Afghanistan

My first glance of Kabul

Afghanistan was once a pearl of the ancient Silk Road and while years of conflict has taken its toll, the country and its people have shown tremendous resilience. Before coming to Kabul, what I knew about it was mainly poverty and war. My new job at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Afghanistan gives me the opportunity to see the country from a different perspective.

Kabul in summer is green, peaceful and quiet. The mountains in the background are dotted with colorful houses that shimmer in the summer heat. The 100th Anniversary of Afghan Independence Day is just around the corner. The streets and alleys are full of national flags crowded by commuters and pedestrians on their way to work. The shopfronts are full of goods laid out orderly for shoppers – indeed the whole city is in festive atmosphere. This is quite a contrast from the Kabul I had imagined. Only the heavy security presence and armed check points remind me that the country is still waiting for peace.

Afghanistan's agriculture and its challenges

As a landlocked farming and pastoralist country, Afghanistan enjoys a superior geographical location linking the East and the West where various cultures converge. Three decades of conflict have, however, taken their toll with an increase in the number of poor people (more than 50 percent of Afghans are living in poverty – the majority in rural areas). Agriculture is still the backbone of Afghanistan's economy, accounting for about 23 percent of its national GDP. Around 60 percent of Afghan households derive some income from agriculture, and the agro-industry still employs about 40 percent of its national workforce. Agriculture is also a major foreign exchange earner - as of 2016, agricultural products accounted for almost 60 percent of total exports. However, due to frequent droughts and water scarcity, insufficient arable lands, lack of infrastructure, a difficult security situation, and the impact of climate change, the country's agricultural development is facing enormous challenges.

Afghanistan and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

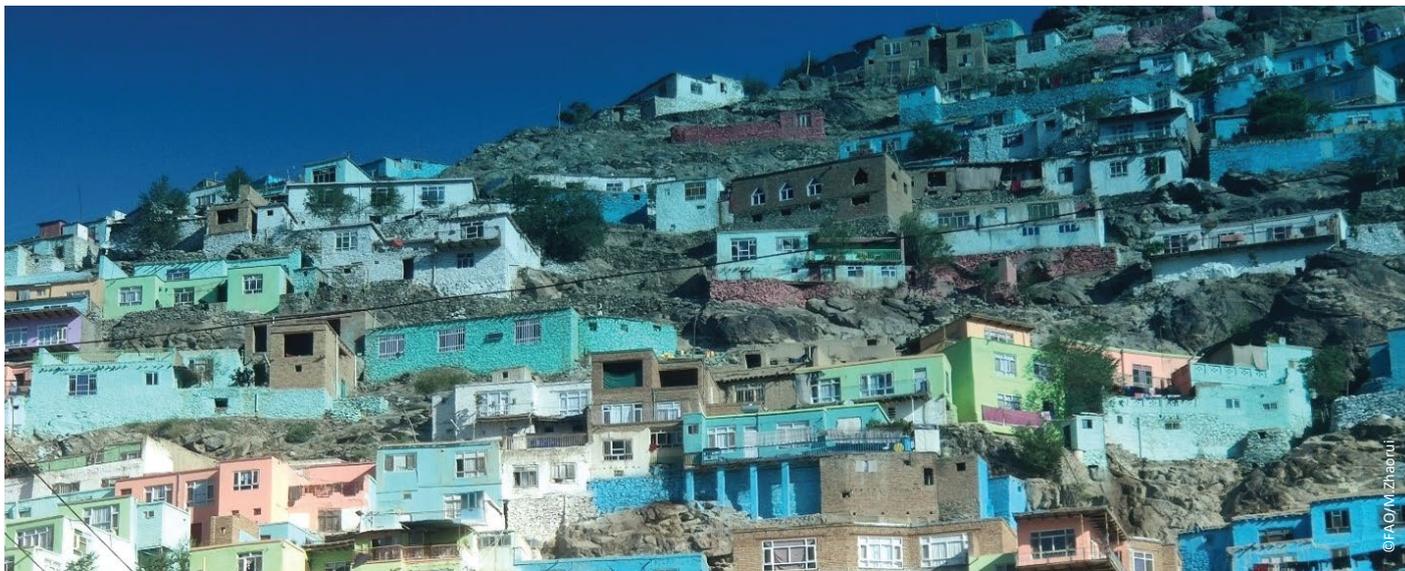
Afghanistan was listed by the United Nations (UN) as one of the Least Developed Countries in the world in 1971. The UN is committed to help Afghanistan eradicate poverty at an early date and support the country to achieve its SDG targets. Afghanistan's stability and prosperity is also vital to regional peace and economic development. As an important partner of China's "One Belt, One Road Initiative" (BRI), Afghanistan was one of the early countries to sign the BRI Memorandum with China in 2016. Over the years, the Afghan people, together with the UN and other international partners, have jointly faced the challenges and endeavored to improve Afghanistan's agriculture and livelihoods. Much has been achieved through international partnerships and collaboration in the cause of constructing a better Afghanistan, however a lot still remains to be done.

FAO Afghanistan works and achieves

FAO has been actively supporting Afghanistan's agricultural development for many years. As the UN's key technical agency specializing in agriculture, FAO is mandated to eliminate hunger, poverty and malnutrition. It has 194 member countries around the world with a presence in 130 countries, led by Dongyu Qu, the newly elected Director General who took office at the beginning of August.

FAO began its work in Afghanistan in the 1950s. The current FAO Representative, Rajendra Aryal, has an indissoluble bond with Afghanistan. He first worked in Afghanistan in 2002 and joined the FAO area office in Herat in 2003. Aryal returned to Afghanistan several times in more recent years on backstopping missions, before transferring to Kabul to take up the lead role of FAO Representative. Today, the FAO Representation in Kabul has a pool of highly qualified and committed staff under his leadership that contribute to the growth of the agriculture sector together with the Government of Afghanistan and are working in nearly every province.

FAO is not confined within the UN compound, but works out of Government premises, working side by side with the Government



counterparts, which makes it unique in itself. It made me think FAO as ‘Pinming Sanlang’, a Chinese expression referring to someone devoted to achieve something at any cost. For nearly two decades, FAO has worked closely with a wide range of partners, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL), Ministry of Energy and Water (MEW), Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda (AFSeN-A) Secretariat, other relevant government line departments, universities, international donors as well as international and local non-profit organizations. Taking into account of the agricultural development priorities of the national guidelines (such as the National Comprehensive Agriculture Development Priority Program), FAO has made great contributions to promote agricultural and economic development in Afghanistan, ensuring food and nutrition security of Afghan people.

FAO has mobilized significant resources to build a pool of projects to help Afghanistan address rural livelihoods, climate change impacts, and meet people's food security and nutritional needs. As droughts and lack of arable lands are the bottlenecks for Afghanistan's agricultural development, FAO's irrigation programmes carried out nation-wide have largely contributed to transform its irrigation infrastructure. In just seven years, Afghanistan gained nearly one million hectares of new arable lands, which has largely contributed to the livelihoods of more than 12 million farmers. Wheat is the main crop for local people, and FAO's wheat programme enabled the country to develop certified wheat seeds through the private sector. In addition, FAO helped the country to improve its agricultural product standards and assisted in expanding Afghanistan's access to domestic and international trade opportunities. For example, the establishment of a national dairy product standard and value chain through FAO's intervention has tripled the incomes of Afghan dairy farmers in several districts. Meanwhile, FAO has continued to focus on strengthening the capacity of local women. The poultry project has, through the course of a decade, trained more than 70,000 rural women. Women were also trained to cultivate high-value crops such as saffron, which has considerably improved the economic status of Afghan's rural women, hence in the longer run, promoted their overall social development.

Agro-trade between Afghanistan and China

China regards Afghanistan as an important BRI partner. According to the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan, the trade volume between China and Afghanistan has been maintained at an annual average of US\$1 billion. China and Afghanistan have signed several agreements enabling Afghan agricultural products such as pine nuts and saffron to trade to China. According to the agreement between the two countries, since November 2018, China has imported about 1,250

tons of pine nuts worth of US\$ 14 million. Many Afghan traders have been doing business with China for years and even established some sub-branch companies in several provinces in China. China-Afghanistan trade in the agriculture sectors has resulted in mutual benefits: Afghan farmers and merchants made profits, and Chinese consumers enjoyed the delicious Afghan products.

FAO Afghanistan team ensures delivery in any circumstances

In summary, I am highly impressed by the achievements made by the FAO team here.

During the first week here in Kabul, I also experienced the first explosion in my life, which was only about three blocks away from our office. I felt the floor shaking. With my heart pounding and the sound of the explosion still reverberating in my ears, I looked around the office, and was amazed to find my colleagues working with their usual calmness and patience. At this moment, I could not help but feeling so impressed by the courage, resilience, and motivation of the FAO staff under such a difficult situation. I pondered how FAO team could deliver supporting thousands and thousands of farmers and herders across the country in such difficult environment.

At this moment, I felt myself being a bit emotional; not because I was scared but somewhat sad, for the UN employees and local people who work and live in this environment. In this corner of the world full of unexpected situations, there is still a small group of unnoticed workers, risking their lives for developing agriculture in Afghanistan! It is their silent effort that brings hopes to the future. To survive, stay and deliver, it requires not only great courage but also great wisdom. They are indeed my most beloved and respectful people.

As Rajendra Aryal, FAO Representative in Afghanistan rightly says, “I am impressed of what we have achieved in Afghanistan, and I'm more impressed with the talented local and international staff who have worked hard over the years to ensure our projects improve economies and livelihoods in the communities they touch. I hope that you will be impressed by both FAO and the remarkable agriculture talents of Afghanistan too”. “Given the success and good practices FAO has achieved over the years, there is an excellent opportunity for FAO and China to work together in Afghanistan under the SDGs and BRI frameworks and successfully contribute to bring economic growth and development in the country”, he further adds.

Life is precious, and a better life is hard to come by. Bearing this in mind, I hope to present this article to all my colleagues whom I truly admire in FAO Afghanistan, who have worked fearlessly and smartly for the cause of economic growth and development.



JICA-funded FAO's Irrigation Project kicks off in Bamyan Province, Afghanistan

FAO Representative in Afghanistan, Mr Rajendra Aryal, together with Bamyan Governor HE Mr Mohammad Tahir Zohair, Honorable Deputy Minister of Energy and Water (MEW) Mr Khan Mohammad Takal and Member of Parliament HE Mohammad Rahim Aliyazada, jointly inaugurated the Naytaq and Raqul canals in Yakawlang District in Bamyan Province on 4 September 2019.

Other attendees included officials and representatives from Ministry of Energy and Water (MEW), Provincial Directorate of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (PAIL), Bamyan Provincial and District Councils, community elders and farmers, FAO project team in the field, and international and local media.

This symbolizes the start of the fourth phase of the FAO's irrigation project "The Project for Enhancing Rural Livelihoods through Improved Irrigation Facilities in Bamyan, Kabul and Kapisa Provinces". The project is funded by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and supported by the Government of Japan with a total of USD 9.9 million over a three-year period. The project is implemented by FAO in Bamyan, Kabul and Kapisa provinces.

The project aims to rehabilitate about 28 irrigation systems with nearly 191 km canal length covering 7,000 hectares of land, which will directly benefit over 16,000 farming families through increased agricultural production and productivity. It is expected to increase the wheat yield by 25% from the current value in these provinces and also provide water for domestic use, livestock and other livelihood needs. In addition, the project is expected to generate about 300,000 labor days during the construction period. 40 government officials

and 300 key farmers will also be trained on improved agricultural and irrigation management practices.

Bamyan Governor and MEW Deputy Minister highly appreciated the collaboration with FAO Afghanistan and expressed that the project will continue to contribute to improving water resources management and largely benefitting the local agriculture development and the local livelihoods. FAO Representative Mr. Rajendra Aryal thanked JICA and the government of Japan and emphasized that irrigation is a critical priority for Afghanistan's agriculture development. He also thanked the Government of Afghanistan for the leadership taken and support extended to FAO for the successful implementation of irrigation projects in the country. "FAO has endeavored over the past decades to improve Afghanistan's irrigation facilities, and this project will be another milestone to contribute directly to Bamyan's sustainable agriculture development", he further added.

HIGHLIGHTS

- As FAO and China put efforts to support Afghanistan
- JICA-funded FAO's Irrigation Project kicks off in Bamyan Province, Afghanistan
- Thailand provides technical support to animal feed laboratory technicians in Afghanistan
- NEPA and FAO set to begin Afghanistan's first-ever Green Climate Fund project
- Ensuring animal health in Afghanistan - and beyond

Thailand provides technical support to animal feed laboratory technicians in Afghanistan

Sharing knowledge through South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC)

Kabul, Afghanistan - Upon the request from the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) and with FAO's support through South-South Cooperation Framework, experts from Thailand conducted an extensive needs assessment of the newly established animal feed quality control laboratory at the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL) in Kabul.

A two-week mission comprised of two experts was carried out in June 2019 from the Department of Livestock Development (DLD), Royal Government of Thailand. The scope of the mission was to take stock of the existing laboratory equipment, assess the capacity of the Afghan laboratory technicians and conduct required technical training to these laboratory staff.

"We are very satisfied with the result of the training. Previously, we were unable to run the available equipment, however after the training, we know how to use and run them. At the beginning of the training, there were some shortcomings from our side since we were not fully equipped with the required knowledge and skill sets. However, this training opportunity really helped us build our capacity since we could learn a lot and get best out of this opportunity. We still need few more equipment to strengthen our laboratory, and we hope that FAO would facilitate similar training activities in future as well", said Farid Karimi, Head of the laboratory.

"The laboratory is well equipped. However, there are still few equipment necessary to run the laboratory properly, and the

technicians need to get the required skills on advanced technology as well", said Udorn Srisaeng, animal feed lab expert from Thailand. "I am very happy to be here and transfer my technical knowledge to my Afghan counterparts", said Nuttanart Khotprom, another laboratory expert from Thailand.

Strengthening the capacity of this newly established laboratory is extremely essential for the Government of Afghanistan because it plays an important role in overseeing the activities of the private sector that are involved in the production and supply of animal feed.

"Building the capacity of Afghan laboratory experts with support of Thai experts was an excellent opportunity under the South-South and Triangular Cooperation. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Royal Government of Thailand for the support, and hope that we will be able to tap other resources from Thailand in coming days as well", said Rajendra Aryal, FAO Representative in Afghanistan.

Strengthening in-country labs will ease the process and save costs

The lack of proper Animal feed testing facility in Afghanistan in the past meant FAO had to ship animal feed samples abroad for testing, which resulted in higher expenses and delayed processing times of up to a month affecting smooth implementation of the project activities. Improper storage units during transport or unnecessary delays also sometimes resulted in the deterioration of the feed sample quality. Transporting and testing of samples outside of Afghanistan normally took around 25-30 days, with added delays up to 10 days due to transport and custom clearance.

Livestock is a key source of income for rural households in Afghanistan

Livestock plays a key role in shaping the livelihoods of households in Afghanistan. Around 75% of Afghan households are dependent on agriculture and livestock, and access to quality feed fundamentally influences animal productivity, health, and welfare. FAO supported thousands of drought-affected families across the country with the provision of concentrated animal feed in 2018 and 2019.



NEPA and FAO set to begin Afghanistan's first-ever Green Climate Fund project

Kabul, Afghanistan – The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation (FAO) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) have joined forces to implement the first-ever GCF project in Afghanistan that focuses on building the capacity of Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA).

The implementation of this project will enable the agency to independently handle the GCF funding projects and lead the government coordination on the GCF projects.

The joint FAO-GCF project entitled "Strengthening NEPA through readiness preparatory support program" will be implemented in two phases. The first phase of the project will involve a series of intervention regarding NEPA gap assessment, capacity building trainings and conferences on issues related to GCF, climate financing and climate change issues and establishment of an online portal to provide climate change information. The second phase of the project will support NEPA to set its country programming process, identify and draft an initial set of sectoral and investment priorities, convene a national consultation workshop with government institutions to review and refine the initial set of priorities, convening consultation meetings with development partners and UN agencies discuss and validate the sectoral priorities. The project will also support NEPA's gender department on how to integrate gender in climate change projects.

"GCF is one of the important global climate finance mechanisms for Afghanistan, while thanking FAO for being ready to technically

support the implementation of the project, this project will open the door for Afghanistan to get access to GCF projects in the future", said HE Schah Zaman Maiwandi, Director General of NEPA.

"2018 was a year of severe dry spell for most of the country, leaving thousands without food and forced to leave their homes. 2019 is thus far proving to be a year of too much water, the consequences of which are yet to be seen. A changing climate means these extremes in weather are only going to get worse in the coming years...and as Afghanistan's population grows, more and more people will suffer from the impacts. It's critical that Afghanistan urgently prepares itself for and prevents more climate-related disasters, else the future of the country and its sun-filled landscapes may not be as bright as they deserve to be", said Rajendra Aryal, FAO Representative in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is one of the world's most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change. Droughts, landslides, decreasing ground water levels, and soil erosion are just some of these impacts, and the downstream results of these impacts have serious health, financial and security implications for Afghanistan's future.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) was set- up in 2010 by the 194 countries who are parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It is a financing mechanism that is used to combat climate change and its impacts in countries that need financial support. GCF began collecting pledges in 2014, and now it is worth USD 10.3 billion. GCF projects are aligned with the priorities of the country they are working in, and once national organizations have sufficient talent, they can receive funding directly, rather than via international partners.

The project will be implemented under the leadership of NEPA with the technical support of FAO. The project is funded by GCF that provides USD 300,000 for its implementation.



Ensuring animal health in Afghanistan - and beyond

“My sheep and goats are my only source of income for my family. We consume their milk and meat and sell what’s left in the market to buy essential household and school items,” says Agha Ma, a female pastoralist in Balkh, Afghanistan.

“We used to lose a lot of animals to disease every year, but thanks to FAO, we are better herders, and are giving our children and grandchildren better educations than we ever had.”

Agha Ma is speaking of the TAD or Transboundary Animal Disease Project, supported financially by the government of Japan, which is working to protect Afghanistan’s livestock against two deadly endemic diseases: Peste de Petites Ruminants (PPR) and Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD).

Nearly 30 percent of households in Afghanistan own goats and sheep. Families use their animals as a source of food as well as a source of income. Any threats to these animals can devastate farming families and threaten the food security of pastoral-dependent communities.

To date, FAO has vaccinated 12 million sheep and goats against PPR, and 300 000 cattle saved from FMD in all 34 provinces of the country. As a result, there have been no outbreaks FMD or PPR in the communities where the vaccinations were given. While these vaccinations need repeating, the project made a real difference to the lives of tens of thousands of Afghan farmers who were able to keep larger herds, and consequently generate more income.

A creative approach

Combatting disease is not an easy task in a country with often inaccessible mountainous terrain, porous international borders and a largely illiterate rural population.

FAO staff and over 1 000 community-based animal health workers carried-out routine checkups, vaccinations and raised awareness about the prevention of contagious animal diseases through early treatment – and through the setting-up of outreach booths at local animal markets across the country, and the publication of pictorial brochures aimed at farmers unable to read.

The farmers were also given information on when and where they could source medicines - and during the process their animals were vaccinated against PPR and FMD. Animal health workers also issued



vaccination cards for each animal - detailing inoculation history.

Samira, 23, a paravet who has been working with FAO for 18 months and who was trained by government epidemiology staff, travels daily from village to village to vaccinate animals and teach communities about animal diseases. “At first it was difficult because communities didn’t understand or trust vaccinations. Now that they’ve seen the impressive positive results, they happily and readily bring their animals for vaccination,” she says.

FAO also restored and equipped the central livestock diagnostic laboratory in Afghanistan’s capital Kabul, with state-of-the-art equipment, a teaching laboratory, storage capacity for 10 million doses of vaccines, and a team of professionals that can swiftly diagnose disease. These professionals train new veterinary students and government epidemiology staff on animal disease surveillance throughout Afghanistan.

Regional problems addressed

While the TAD project has been of enormous help to Afghan farmers, that is not enough. The cross-border movement of sick animals from another country is of great concern. FMD and PPR are endemic in both Afghanistan and neighboring countries such as Iran, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The TAD project built-up veterinary and disease surveillance capacity across the region. Together, neighboring nations explored new ways to build upon each other’s successes. Pakistan, for example, has more diagnostic capacity than others in the region and offered to share its’ expertise through training.

FAO aims to expand its animal health care services for drought-affected livestock keepers and further improve the productivity of nomadic herders through intensified training on disease surveillance, prevention and increased control of a larger variety of animal diseases.

Healthy animals help people live healthy lives and livelihoods - bringing us closer to a #ZeroHunger world.

Contact information:

FAO Representation in Afghanistan
Kabul, Afghanistan
FAO-AF@fao.org



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