FAO continues supporting Armenia in fostering economic growth in the country during COVID-19

FAO Representative in Armenia and Deputy Minister of Economy discuss FAO priorities amid COVID-19 situation

The Deputy Minister Khojoyan briefed the participants, among whom were also the Assistant FAO Representative in Armenia Gayane Nasoyan and FAO National Economist Vardan Barseghyan, about the situation in the country, as well as about resulting changes which might affect the level of cooperation between FAO and the Government of Armenia.

FAO Representative in Armenia Raimund Jehle briefed the Deputy Minister on the role FAO plays in mitigating the pandemic’s impact on food and agriculture in the world, as well as on safeguarding the food security and livelihoods of the most vulnerable.

“We will focus more on smallholders,” said Raimund Jehle. He offered to support the Ministry in a rapid assessment of the situation to analyse the impacts and to prepare for targeted response to the sector.

Both Khojoyan and Jehle confirmed to continue a close dialogue to provide adequate and timely response to the Ministry and the agriculture sector in Armenia.

Read the full article here.
Rural families face the COVID-19 pandemic with more confidence, thanks to FAO

Vulnerable rural families in Armenia, who received livestock and feed support from FAO previously, can better cope with the situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and have a more balanced nutrition. This was found by the rapid assessment on the pandemic’s impact on the socially vulnerable population in Lori and Shirak marzes carried out in March-April 2020.

The two provinces are the poorest among the ten, with high percentage of malnutrition and stunting, this being the reason for the project to pilot a Cash Plus support here. Families have been questioned by phone about their health status, the effect of the emergency situation on their employment and the agricultural works, food consumption and accessibility, as well as market situation, particularly access to markets and price changes. The survey included also the heads of two consolidated communities: Marmashen and Gyulagarak.

The impact assessment showed that Cash Plus approach has strengthened the resilience of the beneficiary households and will certainly contribute to early recovery and mitigation of consequences caused by current situation of the disease outbreak.

“It is of course hard times for everyone, but I think we are fortunate that our family became the FAO pilot project beneficiary,” said Qyaram Khachatryan, a smallholder from Marmashen community. “We were so encouraged and decided to increase the number of hens, which was a wise decision, because now that I cannot accept casual job, our family fully relies on the product from poultry. We cope with the situation quite well and hope things will change soon.”

All households stated that they have started cultivating their kitchen gardens and/or arable lands. The issue indicated by all of them was related to seeds and fertilizers: two key factors were mentioned in this regard – scarcity or lack of financial means to buy seeds and fertilizers and the deficit of fertilizers and quality seeds.

“The situation in the community is quite tense due to the fact that it is time to fertilize the autumn sowing, and there are problems with the supply of fertilizer due to the restrictions on movement both within the country and between countries,” said Karen Arshakyan, the head of Marmashen consolidated community.

As for the nutrition status, or rather for availability of food, they didn’t express any current problem with food availability – they consumed the food they had stored for the winter, such as home-canned vegetables, self-produced fruits and vegetables stored in their basements (potato, cabbage, beans, lentils). At the same time the respondents mentioned that a substantial price increase on food products was registered, at least in their settlements, and they were not able to afford buying the same quantity food and services as they used to before emergency.

Survey participants had serious concerns, that if situation lasted longer than a month, they might face serious problems.

As for the market accessibility, the mobility of people is currently minimized to the extent possible, plus the assessed households do not produce as much agricultural product that would be beneficial to sell in city markets. Normally, they exchange their production with some other commodity or sell it in the village, to neighbours.

The phone survey covered 28 randomly selected beneficiary households (21 percent of the total). It includes 170 people, of which 42.7 percent are children at 0-5 age group.
The national digital agriculture strategy for Armenia is on its way, with FAO support

An online consultation of the Ministry of Economy of Armenia and FAO, held on 7 May, marked another step in the development of a national digital agriculture strategy for Armenia.

The meeting aimed to introduce the digital agriculture framework, key findings of the situational analysis, and discuss and validate the priorities of the digital agriculture strategy.

Participants included Deputy Minister of Economy Arman Khojoyan, Deputy Minister of High-Tech Industry Stephan Tsaturyan, FAO Representative in Armenia Raimund Jehle, FAO local and international experts, as well as the members of the working group – 30 people altogether.

The success of digital transformation requires active involvement and collaboration of many different parties.

While digital transformation is predominantly used in a business context by large international companies, it also impacts other organizations such as governments, public sector agencies and entities, which are involved in tackling societal challenges such as rural livelihood, youth unemployment and agri-food entrepreneurs, by leveraging one or more of these existing and emerging digital technologies.

At the farm level, digital agriculture has the potential to contribute to a more economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable agriculture and meet the agricultural goals of a country.

FAO is committed to support its member countries in transforming agriculture through the adoption of digital technologies and innovation. Also, FAO supports the implementation of strategies, provides advices and guidelines, as well as supports in the process of the digital agriculture transformation at national level.

Currently, FAO is helping Armenia transform its agriculture sector.

“Having a national digital agriculture strategy can help Armenia increase food production, establish incentives and facilitate the development of digital technologies for the agri-food sector. It can be used to promote new markets, strengthen social protection, decentralize trade and serve as a driver for digital agricultural innovation,” said Raimund Jehle, FAO Representative in Armenia.

“The digital agriculture strategy can pave the way for policy options to bridge the digital divide in rural areas, and ensure equal prospects for rural men and women, young and old, in accessing digital tools – quickening the pace of innovations, increasing incomes and job opportunities,” added Jehle.

The present COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that those who remained connected could continue working up to some extent, while those confronted with the rural digital divide had difficulties to keep their activities at level.

Better land management - better economic, social and ecological sustainability

A new FAO project has kicked off helping Armenia achieve land degradation neutrality commitments through sustainable land management and restoration of degraded landscapes.

It should assist the government, among others, in protecting the country’s degraded croplands and pastures by scaling up improved land management practices and in better responding to the challenges posed by climate change.

The project was launched at a virtual inception workshop on 17 June in Yerevan. Participants were updated on project preparation, project sites, financial aspects, project design as well as discussed ways to identify synergies and areas of collaboration with different partners.

Around 40 officials and specialists from line ministries, together with representatives of international organizations, Armenian National Agrarian University,
Cadastre Committee, and marz administrations participated in the workshop.

Currently, about 81 percent of Armenia’s territory is exposed by desertification driven by both, natural and anthropogenic factors. Anthropogenic causes of degradation include inefficient agricultural practices, illegal logging, overuse of groundwater resources (artesian wells), and soil contamination, as well as mining, urban development and road construction.

Almost half of all cropland in the country is affected by water erosion, while wind erosion can be seen in small cropland areas in the Ararat valley. More than the half of all pastures and hayfields are degraded, caused both by over- and under-grazing.

This project will support the country in achieving all the four targets of its land degradation neutrality strategy, including stopping cropland degradation and promoting agroecology; afforestation and/or reforesting two-third of the degraded land; stopping deforestation and improving forest management all across the country; stopping overgrazing and improve grassland management all across the country.

In addition to land degradation, climate change poses a serious risk to the vitality of the agriculture sectors in the country, exacerbating land degradation processes in the country unless action is taken.

To overcome the multiple challenges to sustainable land management in the country, the Government of Armenia is committed to set and implement measures that meet the global commitments of LDN, contributing to goal 15.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals to achieve LDN by 2030.

“The COVID-19 crisis has already shown the importance of a functioning and sustainable food system for each country and the resilience of smallholders to such shocks. Therefore, sustainable land management and eliminating degradation has gained further importance and to put in place appropriate policies,” said Raimund Jehle, FAO Representative to Armenia. “Armenia needs to increase its agricultural production and thus integrate unutilized land. Sustainable land management supports this approach.”

The FAO project will follow a landscape approach in line with Global Environmental Facility’s (GEF) vision to foster sustainable integrated landscapes. Working at landscape level allows issues to be addressed in a multifaceted way, integrating sectors, involving partners and working at different scales – tackling the underlying causes of degradation and challenges related food security and not just the symptoms.

Landscape and territorial approaches that focus on people and their aspirations are among the most effective ways to address development needs while restoring and protecting natural resources.

In this context, the project will work to formulate comprehensive land use planning to rationalize land use in a way that addresses interconnectedness and trade-offs across multiple ecosystems, promote good governance to align policy directives at the national and sub-national level, and promote innovations in sustainable land management.

To remove the barriers of sustainable land management and implementing land degradation neutrality in Armenia, the project will take a three-pronged approach starting with strengthening the enabling environment for land degradation neutrality, followed by scaling up resilient sustainable land management practices in degraded landscapes.

**FAO addresses agricultural land abandonment in Armenia**

FAO continues helping Armenia’s Ministry of Economy address agricultural land abandonment, affecting approximately one-third of all arable land in the country.

Considering the situation caused by COVID-19, whereby the issue of food security becomes even more important for the country, the re-engagement of abandoned agricultural land into production has become imperative.

The joint expert team of FAO and the Ministry of Economy has prepared a draft law, “Ensuring effective use of agricultural land,” which was presented to the Legal Working Group of the Ministry of Economy for review and comment on 6 April.

The purpose of the law is to support sustainable agriculture and rural development – including reduction of agricultural land abandonment and fragmentation, improved land use efficiency, agricultural land market development, enlargement of farms, and development of smallholder farms into commercial farms.

“The preparation of the law, and its eventual adoption, is one of the pillars of the proposed solution to address
agricultural land abandonment in Armenia,” said Maxim Gorgan, FAO land tenure officer. “It shall establish the legal basis for a new public institution and enable a number of land management instruments, such as land banking, mediation of leases, and land consolidation.”

FAO’s analysis reveals that land abandonment is a multi-dimensional phenomenon with interlinked economic, environmental, and social root causes. In Armenia, several negative factors are the main causes of land abandonment, such as inefficient farm structures, ageing rural population, and labour out-migration. The dependence of crop production on water, together with the lack of irrigation facilities, land degradation induced by climate change, and various problems along the agricultural value chains, play a role as well.

The development of the draft law is part of a technical assistance project by FAO. Launched at the end of 2019, the goals are twofold; to establish and operationalize a new policy framework, and to introduce a set of land management instruments to facilitate land market development and farm structure improvements focusing on smallholders and family farms. The proposed land management instruments will build on European good practices and FAO’s extensive experience in this field.

“The first milestone has been achieved; however, there is still a lot of work ahead of us,” added Gorgan, “including development of detailed procedures and tools for mediation of leases, then testing the developed land management instruments in three pilot communities in Arnavir marz before scaling up the approach over the entire territory of Armenia.”

**FAO addresses challenges of the seeds sector in the region, including Armenia**

A new technical cooperation project on making agriculture more resilient to climate change started in Armenia with a project document signed by FAO and the Ministry of Economy of Armenia on 11 May. The two-year project covers Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and North Macedonia.

All four countries are facing problems of adaptation and development of independent, diversified agricultural structures. One limiting factor is the majority of seeds, and other input materials, come from outside, thus, farmers depend on imported seeds. They cannot yet fully benefit from the advantages of quality seeds due to a combination of factors, including hampered seed production, distribution, and quality assurance systems, as well as bottlenecks caused by a lack of good seed policy on key issues.

“Agriculture in Armenia, especially the seed sector, is facing several challenges. The project addresses the most urgent ones, including the lack of national breeds resulting in the dependence on seed import, well-established and trustworthy seed and planting material certification scheme, access and knowledge of high quality and climate tolerant seeds and planting material for farmers, and low awareness on the importance of the management of plant genetic resources.

Farmers often use their own seeds, which carry risks of uncertain production outcomes and disease vulnerabilities. These issues contribute to the increase of the vulnerability of the country’s agriculture to the climate change.

“Moreover, in the context of the COVID-19 era, implementation of the project is very relevant due to the project will support strengthening the national seed system as one of the main pillars of crop production and food security”, added Raimund Jehle, FAO Representative to Armenia.

This project is in line with the Government’s recently approved strategy for sustainable agricultural development in Armenia; improving seed and planting material certification system is one of the prioritized actions there. The interventions will be integrated into the ongoing development actions to ensure the sustainability of the process beyond the project duration. They are tailored to the needs of the government, to build the capacity of government officials at the national and regional levels. These interventions are also in line with the current government policies and strategies.
Experts in Armenia trained in Risk Assessment and Management

A two-day training on strengthening food safety and animal health capacities in risk assessment and management brought together experts from the fields of veterinary science, animal health and food safety. Overall, more than 30 people, mostly decision makers and managers, participated in the event held on 5-6 February in Yerevan, Armenia.

The first day focused on risk assessors as the providers of science and the complementary role of risk managers, who use the science for decision making. Participants observed case studies from international sources and held active discussions on addressing chemical risks in food in Armenia, setting priorities for the country, and the steps needed to be taken to build on and lift up the skills and knowledge available.

The second day of the training focused on the presentation and discussion of specific technical issues on regulated substances and setting safe doses, as well as concerns and priorities in honey and fish products. The participants concluded the training by agreeing on the specific training needs and the way forward on chemical risk assessment.

“This event is a cornerstone for enhancing the skills of Armenian risk assessors and risk managers in the ever-evolving field of risk analysis of chemicals in food chains,” said Alberto Mantovani, international expert on toxicology and food safety chemical risk assessment. “The trainers and the Armenian colleagues work together to implement a One Health approach linking environment, plant, animal, and human health.”

The training echoes the Year of Plant Health 2020 and was a part of an ongoing FAO project begun in June 2019 that works closely with the Food Safety Inspection Body, the Ministry of Economy, and the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia.

The project will continue with the development of a Generic Risk Analysis Manual, which will develop risk assessment, risk management, and risk communication in the country in line with international standards.

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF PLANT HEALTH

- The United Nations General Assembly declared 2020 as the International Year of Plant Health (IYPH).
- The year is a once in a lifetime opportunity to raise global awareness on how protecting plant health can help end hunger, reduce poverty, protect the environment, and boost economic development.
Success Stories

One cow can make a difference – How the FAO project helped improving food security and nutrition through social protection interventions in Armenia

The Atoyan family lives in Mayisyan village of Shirak province (marz), which is situated in the north-west, of the Republic of Armenia. In the West it borders with Turkey, in the North with Georgia. Being at the height of 1 500 – 2 000 m above sea level, the marz is the coldest region of Armenia, where the air temperature sometimes reaches - 46 °C in winter. The marz has the highest level of malnutrition and under-five stunting in the country.

Merselida Atoyan is 69 old woman leaving with her son Paruyr, daughter-in-law Liana and her two grandchildren – Hovik, 13, and Mane, who has just turned 4 years old. Merselida has worked as a cashier for thirty years in her marz centre Gyumri, until the devastating earthquake hit the marz in 1988, taking the lives of almost 50 000 people and getting around 130 000 injured.

The earthquake destroyed buildings and infrastructure, leaving thousands of people without any means of survival such as shelters and jobs. Since that, the Atoyan family had tough time and had to find the way to survive. The son of Merselida was supporting her and two sisters by working in the field with his mother, migrating to Russia for seasonal labour work, etc.

The family owns a 1.5 ha land, which, though, is left abandoned as there was not enough means to rent a tractor to till the land or to buy agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers, and to pay for irrigation water. The only stable income the family had was the money received from the “Family Living Standards Enhancement Benefits” social assistance government programme.

“The government benefit that we have been receiving was not enough to live a decent life and provide my grandchildren with healthy and nutritious food”, Merselida opened up. “For a certain period, it seemed there was no way out from such live”.

But then, Merselida learned about FAO’s cash plus pilot that offered to combine Family Benefits, which were provided within the national programme “Family Living Standards Enhancement Benefits”, with the provision of cattle or poultry and feed for one year, in addition training. It aimed to help vulnerable households productive investments and, ultimately their security and nutrition. This opportunity seemed as for the Atoyan family so for 28 families in Shirak marz “a light the end of the tunnel.”

“FAO provided us with a pregnant heifer and for a year. Our Annman (that is how they named the cow, which means ‘inimitable’ in Armenian) gives 6-7 litters of milk a day, which is enough to feed the family with milk and produce homemade yogurt, cheese and butter. We even manage to sell the surplus to earn money for taking care of other needs, to buy meat and eggs, also fruits and vegetables,” tells Merselida with a smile on her face.

“The cow gave birth to a calf and is now pregnant with another one due in May. We are so happy; soon we will already have three cows! We could not imagine how one cow could change our lives and give us hope for the future. Now I am confident for the future of our family and especially for the future of my grandchildren”.

Merselida’s son is now thinking of breeding the cows and having his own animal farm. He is thinking of becoming a big farmer one day, and now more than ever this dream is not just a dream, but a near future business plan.

Under this pilot, FAO also provided trainings in nutrition, hygiene, food security and safety for the beneficiary families to have better knowledge and understanding on cattle and poultry care, feeding, artificial insemination and health.

FAO pilot “Cash+” supports 133 families in Shirak and Lori marzes the Republic of Armenia, which comprise 802 people, including 388 children. It is worth mentioning, that based on the positive outcomes of the Cash+ pilot, which have been widely acknowledged during the Government hearings, in December 2019, the Government of the Republic of Armenia approved the new program launching that aims at boosting the productive capacities of the socially vulnerable households.

The pilot is a part of the comprehensive project “Developing capacity for strengthening food security and nutrition in selected countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia”, funded by the Russian Federation.
Sprouting seeds of kindness. Cooperation between FAO and Vedi school grew strong!

Basic school N1 in Vedi, Ararat marz of Armenia, is among the selected benefiting from the Russian-funded FAO assistance aimed at strengthening food security and nutrition in selected countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, including also Armenia. They operate an almost 200 square meters greenhouse thanks to the project, and excel in its management. Now the school received an electronic whiteboard, too, helping distant learning.

The cooperation with the school began in 2017, when a 198 sq.m. greenhouse was built by FAO at the school backyard to cover the school’s needs for additional food supply and to diversify the schoolchildren’s diet, as well as use the greenhouse as an educational platform and organize open classes for students.

Days and weeks of hard work, commitment both by the school staff and by the FAO project team, and here we are today – the school has a flourishing greenhouse that gives fresh produce, solicitous staff that cares for every growing plant, and the schoolchildren who benefit the most of it - they are lucky to taste the fresh grown and delicious greens and vegetables every day.

Alvard Papoyan, the school director, is well known in the marz and among her colleagues for her enthusiasm, energy, and positive attitude, and her willingness to do more and better. Her personality helped the links between the school and the project team grew into a good and friendly relationship.

“There is a saying, that ‘the seeds of kindness are hard to sprout, but the fruits are sweet’. Here are the seeds of kindness sown in our school by FAO, that reached out a friendly hand to Vedi N1 basic school donating a greenhouse with heating and cooling system, and today – we received a very valuable gift - an electronic whiteboard,” said Papoyan with a smile on her face.

“The school staff and I personally express our deep gratitude and appreciation to you for being with us, for believing in us, for trusting us, for our close cooperation, which was based on mutual respect and made our dreams come true,” added Papoyan. “We are proud of our close cooperation and hope that it will last for long. Sincere thanks to FAO and the whole project staff.”

Even despite the hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic particularly for schools and schoolchildren, employees of the Vedi school continued to take decent care of the greenhouse, grew healthy cucumbers and the harvest said it all. It was also in due time that the FAO project provided the electronic whiteboard to the school, as it will be extremely useful during distant learning in case the schools do not open in September, and beyond.

The cooperation between the school and FAO covers various events with educational significance, such as conferences, trainings, seminars, which were organized with high-level participants. Both the staff and the pupils were trained in greenhouse production, management and maintenance; received hard copies of comprehensive and user-friendly guides on tomato and cucumber cultivation in heated greenhouses. They were continuously provided by advice on cultivation and maintenance by the project technical experts – both local and international. The school was chosen to host FAO’s World Food Day event in Armenia, as well as organized the first harvest celebration in 2018.

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