



Near East and North Africa Gender Newsletter

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Designing innovative mobile applications targeted at rural women's needs

On September 30, the Arab Women Organization (AWO) announced, at its headquarters in Egypt, the names of the winners in the competition **“Designing the Best Mobile Application for Empowering Rural Women in the Arab Region”**. The competition was organized by AWO under the framework of the Letter of Agreement with the Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa of the FAO (RNE), which includes several activities aiming at promoting gender equality and empowering rural women in the region.

The announcement of the winners took place at the presence of members of the jury, representatives of partner entities, and the local media. As highlighted by the AWO Director General, Dr. Fadia Kiwan, the initiative is part the AWO programme aimed at “improving the lives of rural women in the Arab region, by documenting and addressing the challenges they face in the agriculture sector and that prevent them from participating equally in rural societies”.

In addition to FAO, AWO collaborated with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Arab Administrative Development Organization (ARADO). The competition was aimed at small and emerging companies in the field of information and communications technology, and individual developers of information systems, with special incentives for the participation of girls under the age of 18.



During the announcement of the winners.

The competition included three categories: apps for crops and farm management, apps for facilitating rural women's access to local markets, and apps that help to address some specific challenges faced by rural women.

The prototypes submitted were evaluated by a high-level panel, consisting of Amy Davidson (FAO Information Technology Officer), Engineer Rawda Al Ameer Ali (Programme Officer at the ITU), Dr. Hoda Dahroug (Head of the Central Department for Community Development at the Ministry of Communication) and Engineer Ahmed Al-Thunaibat (IT Officer at ARADO).



Some of the jury committee during their participation via zoom application.

In agreement with FAO, AWO designed an electronic application for evaluating the prototypes presented by the participants in the competition. The evaluation criteria, agreed among the various partners, looked at the originality of the application, its user-friendliness and its effectiveness in responding to rural women's specific needs.

The prizes were awarded as follows:

Under the category "Individuals and Companies"

The Golden prize went to Tebian Muhammad Al-Tayeb Abdel-Qader from Sudan for the application (She). The idea revolves around providing a range of legal, educational, medical and social services to rural women such as filing a criminal report, giving legal and medical consultations as well as informing about job, training and scholarship opportunities.

The Silver prize was awarded to Maryam Abdul-Rahman Al-Nuaimia and Meera Suleiman Al-Azzaniya from the Sultanate of Oman, and Inas Shadoul Mohamed from Sudan for the application (Shatlah¹). The app helps to monitor crops in an easy and innovative manner. For example, it includes a voice-controlled feature that makes the app accessible also to illiterate women.

The Bronze prize was given to Mary Elian Abboud, Gina Fayyad and Centia Youhanna from Lebanon for their application (Mounetna²). The application provides a platform that brings together different producers and entrepreneurs to link them with consumers, who can

compare products and prices and connect directly with their preferred producer.

Wafa Hassan Al-Hayek and Dina Laith Al-Duwairi from Jordan won the prize for the category dedicated to girls under the age of 18 for their application (Beit Shaar³). The application provides a user-friendly platform to rural women, her work and clients. For example, if an employee is seeking a job vacancy, the app will help her with a CV pattern, then a number of local businesses shall be displayed looking to hire someone with her background and expertise. If she is an employee (has products), she can benefit from the platform to sell her products and earn more money to develop her project by asking for donations (with the possibility to remain anonymous). Lastly, if the user is a client, an account shall be created, a list of eventual topics of interest shall be displayed on her home page and she can check the quality of goods through the reviews and the photos. To conclude, it is like an integral community of mutual benefit and sustainability.

Contributed by: Maggie Refaat, Gender Specialist, with inputs from Valentina Franchi, Regional Gender Officer, FAO RNE.

Strengthening resilience and empowering women farmers in the West Bank at the time of COVID-19

Lying South of the West Bank, the town of Dura has 40 000 inhabitants. Most of them rely on agriculture as their main source of income. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a toll on most economies over the world and the agricultural producers of Dura have been no exception. Some families have not been able to sell their agricultural produce, thus seeing their income reduced and their families exposed to economic vulnerability and food insecurity.

The impact of the pandemic exacerbated some of the pre-existing constraints faced by the town, such as water scarcity, which forces Dura's small-scale producers to rely on irrigated agriculture and, by consequence, higher productions costs. With funding from the Government of Canada, FAO supported eight women farmers from a cooperative in Dura through the provision of rainwater harvesting cisterns, with a capacity to collect and store 70 cubic meters of water.

¹ An Arabic word, meaning: seedling.

² An Arabic word, meaning: our supplies.

³ Arabic word, meaning: hair house.



Yasmin's mother after picking the vegetables.

One of these women is Yasmin Shadeed, 29 years old, who comes from a family of ten. Yasmin supports her father, who is the main breadwinner of the family, by growing vegetables in the family's plot. Prior to receiving support from FAO, irrigation water was almost unavailable during the summer season, so that Yasmin could produce only rain fed and low value crops. The cistern provided by FAO allowed Yasmin and her family to cultivate over 11 varieties of vegetables, throughout the summer season. In winter, their economic activities have been significantly enhanced, as the reduced costs allowed the family to investing in new seedlings. Yasmin now makes approximately 1 500 USD a month, which is more than double of what she used to make before. While the effects of COVID-19 have devastated most farming households in Dura, Yasmin's family has been able to stay afloat thanks the cisterns, which increased productivity while decreasing the irrigation costs of the vegetable production.

Yasmin's story is not too different from the stories of the other 8 women who have been supported through the provision of water harvesting cisterns. Most of these women have been able to expand their production and increase their profits thanks to FAO's support.

Ibtissam Al-Shahtet, who comes from the same cooperative as Yasmin in Dura, mentioned how she used to buy vegetables to feed her family, an unsustainable practice considering that she was spending more than 170 USD per month.

"Now I grow my own vegetables and sell half of the harvest to other members of the community. I make a profit of over 300 USD per month", Ibtissam said. "This additional source of income has ensured that we always have food to eat, even during the Covid-19 lockdown, and it has protected us from going hungry" she added.

Contributed by: Hend Younis and Siziba Sithembile Hillary, Communication Unit, Haneen Zaqout, Programme Support, and Intissar Eshtayah, Gender focal Point. FAO, Palestine.

Hafidhah's new life

Hafidhah Ali Yasin, her husband and five children, fled the Hays district in the Hodeidah governorate scared and hungry. They left everything behind to escape the ongoing conflict that has been affecting their country for years. Since her husband was unable to work, she toiled the land, labouring in the fields of neighbouring farms for negligible pay, not even able to earn enough to meet her family's basic needs.



Hafidhah Ali, a 40-year-old woman who fled from the Hays District in the Hodeidah governorate to the Ja'ar district in the Abyan governorate with her family, searching for safety.

With the emergence of COVID-19, vulnerable families like Hafidhah's are more likely to be impacted by the food crisis affecting Yemen. Due to the combined effects of conflict, macroeconomic crisis, climate-related shocks and crop pests (fall armyworm and desert locusts), Yemen can currently be considered the world's worst food crisis. Many Yemeni households are food insecure, the highest concentration being in the south of the country, with nearly 3.2 million of highly food insecure people.

Since Yemen's situation is especially dire, FAO strives to provide support to the most vulnerable households in the country, and empower families like Hafidhah's to cope with the crisis. It is in the context of FAO's support that Hafidhah and her family received, just before the Eid Al-Adha holiday, this year ten egg-laying chickens and some financial resources. This support helped her to meet some of her family needs and celebrate Eid with dignity. "Thank God, I could buy my children clothing and some small gifts for Eid. The timing was perfect because we were penniless", Hafidhah shared with FAO project staff.

The chickens have provided relief to Hafidhah's family. She confirmed that she is anxious to breed them: she cannot afford to lose them because she relies on their eggs and meat. "The chickens brought joy to me and my entire family. I take good care of them and always keep their place clean." She continues: "The chickens have been a huge help to us. Now, I can cook some for my children. And with the 10 eggs I get daily, I cook dinner for my family so that they don't go to bed on an empty stomach."



Hafidhah with two of the ten egg-laying chickens provided by FAO. The poultry is a tangible source of income for Hafidhah and her family.

In Yemen, an estimated 3.6 million people are displaced and living in extremely difficult conditions. More than half of them are women and 27 percent are children. Yemen is currently facing the biggest humanitarian crisis in the world, with 24 million people (80 percent of the country's population) in need of assistance and protection. "Before, when my children cried from hunger, I would try to trick them into sleep. Fortunately, things have changed for the better now and I can feed my kids with chicken meat or eggs," says Hafidhah.

The hardship endured by Hafidhah and her family was excruciating. She described their life before as "a miserable existence because we couldn't secure our livelihoods". Before the intervention, Hafidhah and her family used to have only bread and tea for all their meals, as they simply did not have enough income to buy a diverse and healthier selection of food.



Hafidhah with her family, feeding two of the chickens they received from FAO in Abyan governorate.

Hafidhah is happy that "at least, now my kids don't have to go to bed hungry. It puts my mind at ease to know that my family has something to eat for dinner". She describes their current situation as result of FAO's assistance: "We've been able to eat chicken, chilies and buy vegetables. Our life is better now". Moreover, Hafidhah does not have to work hard in extreme heat on farms every day as she used to.

She says with a beam of delight, "Now, I can go to work whenever I want to, as my children have something to eat. Actually, I have always dreamt of breeding chickens, and my dream has now come true".



Hafidhah Ali and her family members feeling joy and having a sense of relief as life has started showing a glimpse of hope and a better future for her and her family

Hafidhah tells us how excited she and her kids are to have the chickens, as she repeatedly prays for those who helped provide them to her family. "I spoil the chickens as if they were my own babies. My kids wait excitedly for the chickens to lay eggs. Whenever there is an egg, they bring it to me so that I can cook it for them. In the past, I used to feel so hopeless because I didn't expect to receive any help amidst the current situation in the country", said Hafidhah "but luckily we did. Indeed, having the chickens helped ease our burden".

Contributed by: FAO Office in Yemen

FAO Syria and Kuwait support returnee rural families with vegetable seedlings

Melly Rawashdeh

The armed clashes in the Daraa governorate, in Southern Syria, were among the harshest in 2012. Thousands of rural families were forced to flee to other governorates or abroad, to Jordan or Lebanon. Melly Rawashdeh, a 40-year-old housewife from the Philippines, married to Bilal Rawashdeh, lived in in Ibtay, in the Daraa governorate with their three children: two young sons and a 2-year-old daughter.

Melly declared that, even when they were fleeing abroad, they still believed in a brighter future in their own country and hoped go back, one day, to their land. However, the increasingly insecure situation in Syria in that period made their dreams fade away. “We had to find a way to earn a living in Beirut, so my husband started working as an electrician”, Melly recalls.



Melly and Bilal with their children.

After five years, the security situation in Daraa governorate had improved, and thousands of rural families returned to their homes, including Melly's family. Yet, the living conditions were tough: the family did not have access to electricity or sufficient drinking water or water for irrigation. When they finally managed to obtain a limited amount of water for farming, they could not afford the seeds for planting.

“In Beirut, we bought our vegetables from the market. This is not a familiar practice for producers like us: we have always been used to consuming the fresh vegetables from our field. Once back, however, we really needed support to restart farming and be able to survive,” agreed both Bilal and Melly.

Thousands of returnee farmers and rural families are in the same situation, needing support to resume farming for their own consumption and as a source of livelihood. FAO, with the support of the Government of Kuwait, has reached 3 000 returnee families in Daraa and As-Suwaida governorates with assorted vegetable kits (tomato, eggplant and sweet pepper seedlings). As a result of the project, each family was able to produce up to 1 500 kg of fresh vegetables even from a small plot of land.

“Today, I harvest from my land my own food. This is better than buying vegetable from the market as I can guarantee the quality of the food for my children,” said Melly, who added: “My favorite vegetables to plant are tomatoes and eggplants. They grow quickly and are easy to manage in terms of agricultural practices. Now I can make tomato paste and makdous, a traditional Syrian food prepared with small eggplants. It is wonderful to see our lands green and cultivated again”, Melly and Belal added.

“Thanks to FAO for encouraging us and thanks to other farmers for returning to their lands and invest in farming. We celebrate our produce by sharing the surplus with our extended family and neighbors who are in need.”

The determination of a grandmother

Fiya Hassan, 66, is a grandmother of eight children from Ibtata, a sub district of Daraa governorate in southwest Syria. Together with her family, she went through difficult times: during armed clashes, a missile burned her house down, and her family struggled to even meet their daily needs. Despite all this, she was determined not to leave her homeland. “The long years of crisis left us poor, we couldn't afford to buy bread for the family”, stated Fiya.

Lack of resources to buy essential inputs prevented thousands of vulnerable farmers from carrying out the agricultural activities needed to sustain their livelihoods. Food assistance is only a temporary solution, however, which cannot satisfy the productive need and the desire to be self-reliant. “In the past, farming was considered a traditional practice in the region, and most relied on other ways to earn a living. But after the crisis things have changed: farming is now the only way to survive and provide our families with nutritious food”, added Fiya.



Fiya while collecting eggplants.

She recalled: “My son Jamal was the one who cared for our land, but he passed away a few years ago. From that day, nobody worked on the land, not even myself”. FAO is supporting rural families, like Fiya's, to cope with the challenges that prevented them from restarting farming, due to the lack of access to essential agricultural inputs.

Fiya said that she received tomatoes, eggplant and sweet pepper seedlings from FAO. “This encouraged me to start farming again” she said. “I cannot describe my feelings once I saw my crops growing. Seeing my land green again filled me with hope”. Fiya managed to harvest 1 500 kg of tomatoes and eggplants, sufficient to meet her family's food requirements for 5 months. “The color green means hope to me, and when my land is green, it reminds me of my son who always loved farming just as I do”.

Many farmers want to return home after their displacement, but for many it is a dream difficult to fulfill, as they have lost everything, including their homes. According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019, more than 9.3 million people in Syria are food insecure. Ten years of conflict have affected the lives and nutritional status of many, particularly women and children. On top of this, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation further.

A video of Fiya's story could be found [here](#).

Contributed by: Salma Hakki, Communication Officer and Fatma Annan, Communication Assistant. FAO, Syria.

International Day of Cooperatives, an occasion to shed the light on the support of FAO to the General Directorate of Cooperatives in Lebanon

On the occasion of the International Day for Cooperatives, FAO and the General Directorate of Cooperatives (GDC) jointly organized an event to present FAO's initiatives within the framework of the Canada-funded project "Support to Women's Cooperatives and Associations in the agri-food Sector in Lebanon". The project supports women's cooperatives and associations to participate in local economies by establishing or expanding enterprises in the agri-food sector.

The project is being implemented by FAO since October 2018, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, General Directorate of Cooperatives (GDC), and the General Directorate of Agriculture (GDA). It therefore fit very well in the celebration of the International day of Cooperation, which this year was dedicated to the theme "Cooperatives for climate action".

The event was attended by H.E. Abbas Mortada, Minister of Agriculture; by Mr. Jamie Schnurr, Head of the Canadian Cooperation; by the FAO Representative in Lebanon, Mr. Maurice Saade, together with the project team, representatives of women's cooperatives, GDC Staff and other project partners.

After a welcoming speech by the Director-General of the GDC, Eng. Gloria Abouzeid, H.E the Minister of Agriculture recognized how cooperatives play a key role in the development of the Lebanese productive sectors, including agriculture, and how it is essential to strengthen the role of rural women within them, especially considering the difficult situation that Lebanon is going through.

Minister Mortada also stressed the importance of enhancing the capacities of rural women, adding: "Communities are based on cooperation. The cooperation is the teamwork that allows the individual to advance."



Celebration of the International Day of Cooperatives in the presence of H.E Lebanese Minister of Agriculture.

From his side, Mr. Jamie Schnurr confirmed that "Canada is proud to support the agriculture sector in Lebanon to strengthen local economies and help the most vulnerable rural communities rebuild their livelihoods, with the ultimate goal to increase the food security in the country. Through this project, Canada is particularly proud to support women's cooperatives and leadership in the agriculture sector. Canada believes that when women play a strong social, economic and political role, societies grows stronger, richer, and more secure."

In his speech, Mr. Maurice Saade confirmed that FAO values the critical role that inclusive and effective cooperatives can play in supporting small producers, especially young and female farmers. FAO also recognizes the need to work for women's empowerment and to strengthen their involvement in the agricultural sector as well as their participation in cooperatives. An important aspect of this strategy is to shed light on the opportunities for women in this field and their successful experiences, starting with the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated data in all relevant institutions.

During the meeting, attendees were also presented the project's activities aimed to strengthen the capacities of the General Directorate of Cooperatives through a quality Management Information System, complemented by the provision of training and equipment. In addition, the project is assisting the GDC in the preparation of a five-year strategy through a participatory process.

It is worth mentioning that during June and July 2020, a series of training sessions about the law of cooperatives was also conducted, which reached out to more than 600 participants, most of which women. The text of the law was widely shared, together with some guidance materials, as part of the project's activities.

During her presentation, Jamal Osta, from the GDC, was able to explain the text of the law during a very interactive session. She highlighted the importance of cooperatives in the current crisis in Lebanon, and potential to promote food security and decent employment.



During the series of trainings organized by FAO and GDC on the law of cooperatives.

Twenty-four representatives from women groups and associations participated in the training session in Zahle. For instance, Rosalie Asmar from Qaa el Rim, who is currently establishing a cooperative, said she highly benefitted from the session, as the information shared during the training was very helpful to understand what is needed to establish a cooperative. Another participant, Hanadi El Maalem from Qab Elias, said that the session dismantled some stereotypes and prejudices she had about cooperatives. “Today we learned that cooperatives aim at helping the community, by enhancing its livelihoods, and not only at supporting some members of the cooperative”.

Thanks to the project, more than 250 women's cooperatives are benefitting from raising awareness sessions on gender equality and women's rights, including freedom from violence. They will also benefit from guidance on the establishment of profitable businesses through the findings and recommendations emerging from a gender assessment of the agri-food sector.



During the series of trainings organized by FAO and GDC on the law of cooperatives.

Through the farm business schools, women in the cooperatives/associations are provided with training on topics relevant to them and to business management. They are further coached and supported by 25 trained facilitators to develop productive and sustainable business plans.

Contributed by: Elite Shehadeh Sfeir, Communications Consultant, reviewed by MarieLouise Hayek, Programme Assistant and Gender Focal Point, FAO Lebanon.

Inspiring women in forest science and technology in Sudan

Science and gender equality are both crucial to a country's development. Given various social, economic, and cultural inequalities and legal impediments, particularly within the forestry sector, women in many societies often experience different forms of discriminations that limit their ability to fully participate in and benefit from Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+). It is therefore crucial to ensure that REDD+ actions are inclusive, fair and gender-responsive both in policy and in practice.



A picture of Sudanese forests.

One small step on the pathway to achieving equality is to recognize and act upon the fact that, despite having no innate cognitive differences, women are underrepresented in many scientific and technical fields, particularly in leadership roles. Among various causes, one can identify a lack of inspiring female role models and limited exposure of girls to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects due to persisting gendered stereotypes. There are, however, many cases of women championing STEM-related careers.

Anwar SidAhmed's story

Anwar SidAhmed, the Head of the Department of Monitoring and Mapping of Natural Resources at the Remote Sensing and Seismology Authority (RSSA) in Sudan, is definitely a successful example to recognize. A forester by education, Anwar started her career as part-time lecturer at the Forest Research Center, teaching plant taxonomy, dendrology and plant physiology. She joined the Remote Sensing Authority (RSA) in 2008 as a research assistant. Since then, Anwar earned an MSc and started her PhD on Inference of Tree Biophysical Parameter, Volume and Carbon using Synthetic Aperture Radar data, both at the Institute of Environmental Studies of the University of Khartoum.

At the moment, while waiting to defend her PhD dissertation, Anwar supports remote sensing activities under the framework of the project "Support for the design of the MRV⁴ system in the framework of REDD+ Readiness in the Sudan" supported by the FAO and the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) of the World Bank. The objective of the project is to support the Government of Sudan in the development of a robust National Forest Monitoring System (NFMS) to obtain up-to-date, reliable, transparent and accessible information about the state of the country's forests and guide decision- and policymaking for sustainable management of Sudan's forest resources.

Anwar has always been interested in remote sensing and its applications in the forestry sector, "I really liked science and how it made studying natural resources and forestry interesting and easy. I prayed to get the job at the RSA," she said. "With the support provided by the FAO, we have recently finalized activity data component for Sudan Sub-national forest reference emission level (FREL) for deforestation. Now, we are waiting to respond to the comments provided by the reviewers at the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In addition, I am working with UNDP's Sudan Climate Change Risk Finance Project, which aims to create an enabling environment for climate risk management of smallholder farmers and pastoralists in rain-fed areas."

Anwar considers her work crucial for Sudan's sustainable development. "Remote sensing and GIS is particularly important to gain accurate information on the spatial distribution and limitations of Sudan's natural resources, as Sudanese people depend heavily on their natural resources (agriculture, water, pasture and forest) for living."

"There is an urgent need to speed up the completion of our resources database, to be able to prepare realistic plans to meet the growing demand for food and fuel and reduce the hazards caused by drought and rain

fluctuations. Remote sensing can also support disaster risk reduction and recovery efforts," added she.

Anwar did not have any female role model, but she firmly believes that women should have the same opportunities as men as they are as strong and powerful as they are. Women have to look inside themselves and fight those oppressive and discriminatory stereotypes that society has assigned to them. She always reminds herself that she is not vulnerable and that she does not need to be protected by others.



Anwar SidAhmed at the MRV workshop, Khartoum, Sudan.

While talking about current opportunities and challenges for women in science, Anwar noticed that the success of African women has not been always reflected in employment rates in the fields of STEM. She continued: "There are indeed many difficulties and obstacles for women who decide to engage in STEM fields. It is often difficult to achieve a work-life-family balance, as women have to juggle multiple roles within their family, with their kids and their needs. Having big dreams and goals, and fighting to achieve them, can often be a headache too."

Nevertheless, Anwar encourages more girls and women to get involved in STEM subjects. "One strategy is to help girls change their mindsets and help them believe that they have the ability to learn whatever they want, ensure them that there are no limits to their abilities. Stereotypes can also be challenged by exposing girls to examples of women who have succeeded in STEM-related fields. This can be done by portraying these women as relatable and by highlighting how they became scientists. This will make it easier for girls to envision themselves following a similar path to success. In addition, governments should provide opportunities for girls to work and help them to succeed in STEM-related tasks to build their confidence."

⁴ MRV refers to the Measurement, Reporting and Verification system

At the end, Anwar emphasized her excitement about future opportunities and goals by saying that she is eager to advance her expertise and skills in remote sensing and GIS further. In addition, she wishes to continue working in this field and support more institutions in Sudan in the use of remote sensing data and GIS to help them implement and design their projects effectively and sustainably. Lastly, her ultimate goal is to participate in one of the European Space Agency (ESA) projects.

REDD+ stands for countries' efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and foster conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

Contributed by: Maryia Kukharava, Communication Officer, FAO Sudan.

FAO RNE Gender Stocktaking Exercise 2020: an agreed plan of action to strengthen gender mainstreaming in the region

In November, FAO RNE approved and disseminated the 2020 Gender Stocktaking Exercise and Capacity Needs Assessment report. The Exercise, carried out in the framework of the FAO Policy on Gender Equality, aimed to assess how gender is mainstreamed in different aspects of FAO's work. In particular, it assessed: 1) staff capacities to address gender equality; 2) gender mainstreaming in projects and programmes; and 3) the integration of gender equality dimensions in relevant knowledge products. The analysis focused on the biennium 2018-2019.

The findings of the analysis show that there is room for improvement, particularly in relation to the mainstreaming of gender in project design and implementation, which is still far from being systematic in the region. In this sense, the assessment highlighted the need to reinforce staff awareness and capacities to address gender in their respective areas of work. It also exposed the need to identify effective mechanisms to engage the Regional Gender Officer and the Gender Focal Points more systematically in the formulation of projects and in the development of relevant knowledge and communication products.

The report provides a set of recommendations, targeted at the regional, sub-regional and country offices. These recommendations are further detailed into a **Regional Gender Action Plan**, which includes concrete follow-up actions, deliverables, and targets to be achieved in the next two years.



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