FAO supports rural communities in Kunar province to promote sustainable forest management

Under a Global Environment Facility (GEF) funded project in Afghanistan, FAO in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) recently supported the rural communities in Kunar province by providing more than 50,000 walnut saplings for reforestation. This effort aimed to raise the awareness of the communities about sustainable forest management, rehabilitation and restoration of degraded forest areas, increasing biomass and promoting biodiversity conservation, reducing soil erosion, enhancing carbon sequestration, and reducing GHG emission.

“Sustainable forest management can have a vital role in climate change mitigation. At the same time, it also contributes to improved food security and economic development. I would like to sincerely thank GEF for supporting such an important project in Afghanistan”, says Rajendra Aryal, FAO Representative in Afghanistan.

Deforestation and forest degradation are serious challenges in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has about 1.78 million ha of forest and shrubs accounting for about 2.8 percent of the total land area. Forests in Afghanistan however have experienced a rapid decline. Between 1990 and 2000 an average annual rate of deforestation was 2.3 percent based on forest area estimated in 1990, which further increased to 2.9 percent per annum between the years 2000 and 2005. Over the period of 15 years (1990-2005), the country lost about 34 percent of its forest cover, which was about 442,000 ha.

The main factors for deforestation and forest degradation are over-exploitation of natural resources, overgrazing, unsustainable harvesting, and the limited number of rehabilitation and restoration initiatives. Illegal felling and transporting of trees for the use as construction material and firewood also contributed to deforestation. Kunar is one of the provinces that is highly affected by the deforestation causing serious environmental damages, such as heavy sedimentation in Kunar River, floods, and landslides.

“Deforestation was a big issue in Kunar Province because there were no alternative livelihoods options for the surrounding communities. Felling of trees and selling in the local market was a good source of income. Thanks to the GEF-funded project that is providing not only the awareness-raising sessions on the importance of natural resources management and sustainable forest management, but also the walnut saplings that has allowed the communities to plant walnuts in the targeted areas and contribute to reforestation. These trees will be a good source of income for the people and will restore our forest in future”, says Najibullah Adel, the Provincial Director of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (PAIL) in Kunar.
FAO promotes community-based sustainable forest management

FAO has established forest management associations (FMAs) at the community level in Kunar Province. These FMAs promote sustainable forest management among community members through different awareness raising sessions that explain the importance of natural resources, current threats to those resources, and sustainable forestry management with the participation of the communities. The associations normally comprise of 11 members, a chairperson, and a vice-chairperson, and all of them work together on sustainable forest management.

Mr. Tahsil, a 50 year old resident of Manogi District of Kunar Province, used to sell wooden construction materials before becoming a member of a FMA. After attending few awareness raising sessions on the importance of sustainable forest management, he has now become an active member of that FMA. He enthusiastically takes part in raising awareness among other community members on the importance of trees. "Previously, I did not know anything about the importance of trees for our environment and livelihoods. Now I understand their vital role; I therefore teach other community members about the importance of trees and I try to stop them from felling these important trees", says Tahsil.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), through a Global Environment Facility (GEF) funded project in Afghanistan aims to support community-based approaches to sustainable land and forest management, promote biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, and rangeland productivity. The project has four components and one of the major activities of the project is to rehabilitate 10 000 ha of high conservation value forests and 20 000 ha of other forest types in Kunar, Paktia, and Badghis provinces.

FAO Afghanistan – Coping with Teleworking in an extremely challenging environmen

It was Saturday, 28 March 2020 when the Afghan government announced lockdown and self-quarantine in the capital city Kabul and other major cities to prevent the spread of coronavirus pandemic. This forced FAO team across the country to work from home.

In fact, working from home is not new in Afghanistan as people quite frequently experience it when insecurity threatens their lives in one way or the other and forces them to switch to alternative working modality. However, this lockdown was something new in itself since the staff knew that this could last longer than any other situation experienced earlier. FAO Afghanistan immediately implemented its Business Continuity Plan (BCP), and decided to have most of the international and national staff telework from home during the lockdown situation. Currently, only the most critical staff go to the office on rotational basis and rest are teleworking.

This new experience has also allowed the staff to spend some quality time with their family members while teleworking and maintaining their personal health and safety. FAO Afghanistan staff share their experiences during the coronavirus pandemic explaining what teleworking means to them.

"Work from home is joyful and even more productive", says Moeen-Uddin Siraj, Senior Operations Officer. "The only challenge I however encounter is the unreliable Internet connection that forces me to work from 8 a.m to 8 p.m. At the same time, the limited Internet connection also allows me to play table tennis with my family members every now and then", he added.

"Teleworking is important for maintaining the business continuity and ensuring personal health and safety", says Arzoo Noor, a program analyst. "When I first joined FAO three years back, on the very first week we were asked to work from home due to security concerns, and I was a bit surprised with the notion of working from home since it was a new term for me, which I had never experienced in the past. Later I realized how important it was to keep the business continue. I believe that teleworking is very helpful for me as I can work, attend virtual meetings and meet the deadlines. At the same time I can also take care of my family while staying safe at home", she concluded.

"Teleworking under lockdown situation has been challenging, particularly if it is unpredictable and nobody knows how long it will last. In administration, we have to adjust ourselves to the situation ensuring efficient day-to-day administrative operations of the Representation. In general, we’ve been successful in transitioning between working from home and office as per the weekly plan of the reduced footprints”, says Amanullah Kabiri, Assistant FAOR (Administration). "In general, teleworking is good; we have flexible working hours and extended breakfast and lunchtime. We also have enough time to have more interaction with the family. I discuss with FAOR every single issue on WhatsApp thanks to his flexibility and availability, and so far we are managing the situation well though things have slowed down”, he added.

“I have been working in Afghanistan since last six years and I have observed lockdowns quiet often, especially during elections and security threats. It is thus not very new to me. However, this time the situation is bit different as this is due to the pandemic”, says Hima Upotre, CTA for Global Environment Facility (GEF) project. “For us, the only concern is that in-country medical facilities are limited and the airport is also closed down, and it would be very difficult to be evacuated in case of medical or any other emergency”, she further added. “The current stressful situation due to COVID-19 has restricted everything, everywhere, but we try to not stop our activities”, says Zahra Stanikzai, a member of the resilience unit. “We do our best to deliver assistance to the people in need. Teleworking taught me to work for humanity in every tough situation, continue helping people, helping the community and helping the globe in dire situations”, she added.

“As an international staff based in Afghanistan, lockdown is sort of normality as we live in a maximum security compound without being able to walk in the street, go shopping, movies, restaurant or for a walk in the park. It is just not possible due to the security circumstances. In this sense the COVID-19 pandemic hasn’t changed much our daily lives”, says Fabrizio Cesaretti, Resilience and Rehabilitation Officer. Teleworking has proved to be good alternative working modality in difficult situations though it also has some challenges that are not deniable. For example, communication is difficult during teleworking. Specifically in Afghanistan where beside all other challenges due to teleworking, people have to deal with unreliable Internet connection and inconsistent electricity.
“Most of the time work cannot be done as quickly as it is done in the office”, says Mariam Danish, a member of the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC). “The biggest challenge is that electricity is not consistent and the Internet connection is poor at home that make my teleworking hard most of the time”, she added.

“Lockdown has caused some major delays in our daily activities as we are not able to physically visit the projects areas and the beneficiaries”, says Sayed Asil Sadiqi, Communications Officer in Herat.

The situation under lockdown is different for women in Afghanistan. Majority of families expectation that if a woman is at home, she should also do the house works even if she is remotely working for the office too. This has increased the workload of the female staff while teleworking unfortunately.

“I believe that work from home is challenging in Afghanistan”, says Nabila Barmaki, another staff member explains. “I have the habit of working till late evenings even in normal situation, but still I find teleworking not easy under this lockdown. I live in a family of seven in a four-bedroom apartment, and though my family tries to keep the environment peaceful to enable me to focus on work, still, I cannot really focus the way I normally do when I am in the office”, said Nabila. “Fortunately, my family is very supportive; however they still expect that when I am at home, I should do the housework as well. Whenever I need to contribute to the housework, I have to extend my office working hours in the evenings to finish the work meeting the deadline”, she added.

“Despite challenging working environment and stringent security situation, FAO Afghanistan team is fully committed to continuing business through teleworking. We are facing very complex and multi-dimensional issue, and I am working closely with FAO senior management for getting necessary support so that the team can stay and deliver”, said Rajendra Aryal, FAO Representative in Afghanistan. “This is a global crisis, and this is the time when our patience, commitment and resilience are being tested”, he added further.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has severely affected the psychological health of people in Afghanistan.

Ahmad Aryan is a regional resilience officer in Kandahar. He sees the lockdown as very challenging. He believes that the challenge is emotional rather than physical. He feels that getting locked down is like being in a prison. He always wonders when the virus will go away. His biggest question now is - is this lockdown situation going to end soon or not? For him, it’s more like being in a paranoia situation.

Coronavirus adds to the problems from conflict

The coronavirus hit Afghanistan in late February with ever-increasing speed over March and April.

Controlling the epidemic in Afghanistan is challenging due to a diverse set of issues, such as fragile health system, lack of public awareness, insecurity, and return of a large number of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan. Closure of borders and disruption of supply chain is influencing food prices, and the current lockdown is largely affecting the livelihoods of the vulnerable population.

HIGHLIGHTS

- FAO supports rural communities in Kunar province to promote sustainable forest management.
- FAO Afghanistan – Coping with Teleworking in an extremely challenging environment.
- From vulnerability to resilience: Hawa Gul’s story of diversified livelihood and increased income due to FAO’s poultry intervention during COVID-19.
- Provincial Agroecological Zoning Firsthand Experience and Launch of Agroclimatic ATLAS in Eastern Zone.

From vulnerability to resilience: Hawa Gul’s story of diversified livelihood and increased income due to FAO’s poultry intervention during COVID-19

Hawa Gul, 42, is a mother of seven children. She lives in Kohak village of Farah district in the western Farah province, where FAO has recently assisted the most vulnerable households, specifically women-headed households with backyard poultry support intervention through the generous contribution of OFDA/USAID.

The aim of this intervention was to provide home-based income opportunities for vulnerable women as well as sustain nutrition and food security of the vulnerable farmers who are at the brink of food insecurity as well as adversely impacted by COVID-19 pandemic. FAO is supporting and working with the Government of Afghanistan to find alternative ways to address the needs of the most vulnerable smallholder farmers and landless households who are in dire need of assistance during this pandemic.

Hawa Gul takes care of her children alone as her husband is retired and is unable to support the family. “I mainly relied on livestock-based livelihoods in order to feed my family. Keeping goats was the only source of income I had in recent years and I used to manage all the requirements of my family through the sale of goat milk. However, the drought of 2018 negatively affected our livelihoods. My livestock become weak and the milk production reduced day by day due to the dried pasture and the high price of the animal feed in the market, which hindered me to provide proper feed for my livestock”, explains Hawa Gul. She was also keeping a few chickens, but the number was not enough and egg production was insufficient even for her family consumption. “I ended up selling several heads of my livestock, and I went through a really difficult period that time”, explains Hawa Gul further.

Smallholder families like Hawa Gul are vulnerable to various shocks ranging from natural hazards to market fluctuations and animal diseases. The current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted her family’s livelihood even before they could fully recover from the adverse impacts of the 2018-drought. Thanks to OFDA/USAID, FAO recently supported her with a poultry input package that has enabled her to enhance her family’s livelihoods, and food and nutrition security.

Given the fact that there are lot of cultural barriers - particularly for the women in Afghanistan – to participate in other livelihood support activities, this intervention has provided access to nutritious food and home-based income opportunities for women through increased home consumption of eggs and the sale of surplus eggs in the market. “I cannot explain how much happiness the poultry package I received from FAO has brought back to my family. It’s a good home-based source of income, and I earn AFN 150 (around USD 2) from the sale of eggs everyday. I expect to increase this amount in the future”, exclaims Hawa Gul.

Hawa Gul from Farah Province of Afghanistan, during poultry activities
This intervention is a part of FAO’s Support to Drought-affected and Food Insecure Farming Families. One of the activities under this project is to support around 1 500 vulnerable and food insecure households in three provinces (Kunar, Daykundi, and Farah) with poultry inputs. Each household received 20 pullets of 16-week age with necessary vaccination along with 100 Kg of compound poultry layer feed, two polyethylene drinkers and feeders, and essential construction materials for cooping. FAO also provided leaflet with hotline numbers that provided technical support on backyard poultry to the farmers when needed. This intervention is instrumental in supporting vulnerable families to also minimize the adverse economic impacts of COVID-19 by having ready access to cash-flow / income when employment opportunities have reduced and household purchasing power is diminishing.

Despite the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, FAO is committed to support the most vulnerable farmers with the emergency and livelihoods assistance while strictly following the precautionary measures that are instructed by WHO and the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) to safeguard the lives of beneficiaries and the staff.

Provincial Agroecological Zoning Firsthand Experience and Launch of Agroclimatic ATLAS in Eastern Zonet

Under the EU-funded project “Strengthening Afghanistan Institutions capacity for the Assessment of Agriculture Production and Scenarios Development” the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in close collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL) has supported the Provincial and District Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock Offices of Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman provinces on skills and capacity building through on the job training on Provincial Agroecological Zoning & GIS/RS and launch of Agro-climatic ATLAS.

This training workshops helped develop technical skills of government counterparts in developing more efficient and sustainable agricultural systems to feed the future, to formulate policies and strategies for sustainable and diversified use of natural resources and investments to harness production potential and enhance agricultural efficiency through better planning for climate-smart agriculture. The long-term impact of the workshop is to enable government and associated stakeholders to adapt to the unique zonal requirements and amend cropping systems according to water availability, soil and climatic conditions and market demands. This includes land characteristics, topography, land use, soil, water analyses, weather and climate, yield, and profitability that will lead to making recommendations towards “what” should be grown “where” and “when”.

Agro-Climatic Atlas developed by the project having detailed information of fifty climate parameters, climate classification, and projected climate change for 100 years was presented and launched in the presence of PAIL and DAIL staff.

The National Agro-Ecological Zoning data and information generated in the form of maps and spreadsheets were practiced with PAIL and DAIL staff and most of the participants got enough hands on experience to use these information. Basic training was given to the participants on GIS and Remote Sensing and the participants were able at the end to work with GIS raster and vector formats. Participants were trained on the methodology to develop land cover maps using GIS, and Land Cover Map for each province was prepared by the participants themselves as a test at the end. All the four outputs of the project were explained in great detail, and through Q&A sessions PAIL and DAIL staff were explained why and how the project was implemented, what the results are and how these results can be used in planning. The generated information on crop suitability, soil suitability new zoning, climate classification, irrigated areas zones, rainfed zones, and length of growing period zones were also presented in detail and explained to the participants.

The Director of PAIL Nangarhar said that this capacity building program will assist eastern zone in solving many challenges including food insecurity, agro-ecological zoning, climate change preparedness, identifying water availability, soil suitability, measuring crop water requirements and the potential of agriculture land. Another participant expressed that “Data is money” and with good data one can take decisions for better implementation of the projects and help farmers become food secure.

The Director of PAIL Laghman quoted that previously he had data for the province, however the data were not accurate due to which many issues were faced while planning. National Agroecological Zoning data and ATLAS will now fill in the data gaps to be used for better planning. PAIL Director of Kunar said that such workshops are fundamental for agriculture sector and explained that the main reason of lack of development of the sector as compared to other countries is due to lack of agriculture profile or agro-ecological zoning.

Contact information:
FAO Representation in Afghanistan
FAO-AF@fao.org
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Kabul, Afghanistan