**Project on Strengthening the Role of Women in Agriculture for Improved Household Food Security and Nutrition**

Afghan women face a double disadvantage in their efforts to deepen the link between food security, gender equality and peace-building. The prevalence of social norms and religious tradition in defining women’s status in society and the gender-differentiated impact of the thirty-year conflict have unacknowledged and undervalued their essential contribution to increase agricultural productivity despite accounting for 43% of the sector’s labour-force. With the recent increase in food insecurity especially among female headed households (40%) as compared to 27% among men headed households according the National Risks and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) of 2011-2012, the strengthening of women’s role for increased agricultural productivity contributing to improving food and nutrition security has taken the central place in major post-conflict interventions to sustain peace.

Since 2003, FAO has focused on engendering the agricultural sector as a pathway for reducing gender inequality, increasing food security and promoting inclusive recovery efforts. It has implemented a wide range of activities to address the gender bias of the sector based on ingrained cultural norms and the informality of the agricultural economy coupled with severe weather conditions, natural disasters (droughts and floods), insecurity, inadequate measures to tide over the ‘hungry season’ (spring and autumn waiting for the next harvest) and frequent hike of food prices.

This project which began in 2012 and is nearing completing (September 2015) was launched with two key objectives: *strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL)*, in particular the Home Economics Directorate for improving the effectiveness of its service delivery in rural, urban and peri-urban areas and *establish women’s agriculture training and development centres* to be called the Women’s Technology Transfer Training Centres (WTTTC) for supporting the introduction and transfer of innovative and appropriate technologies to increase the productivity of women farmers. The Centres would also serve as resource centres for providing women with information, technical briefs and other knowledge products for increasing food security and nutrition and empowering women to become agents of peace and equitable growth.

Since its launch in 2012, the project has trained developed the capacity of MAIL’s staff members who are engaged in providing front-line support to rural women in particular especially for mobilizing women from the communities, raising their awareness and teaching them the new agricultural techniques. The 3 WTTTCs which were established in Kabul (central region), Herat (western region) and Badakhshan (northern region)with each Centre covering four provinces, 12 districts and 60 villages have become the hub for training new skills to women. Over 6,000 women in the identified provinces have been trained on new techniques of cultivating vegetables and fruits with new varieties of vegetables and fruits for higher yields. In addition, for the first time women were trained about compost making and mycelium production to sustain the production of mushroom (previously this was imported from the neighbouring countries). These interventions have improved the agricultural productivity of the women, improved the dietary content of their households and they have been supported to have access to the local markets to sell the extra vegetables and fruits after meeting their consumption needs.

The key achievements of the WTTTCs are:

* They addressed a felt need of the women engaged in agricultural production to participate in training programmes to increase their knowledge about production techniques but could not do so due to their mobility restrictions (travel only with a male companion or mahram which made it difficult); the Centres provided training in the vicinity of their homes and were conducted in a safe and secured environment,
* Sustainability of the Centres as they will be managed by the HED, MAIL’s provincial offices – Department of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (DAIL) on completion of the project and the staff of DAIL have been trained as part of the project’s capacity development component,
* On the technical front, the project introduced a number of new and innovative techniques and products which increased the women’s agricultural productivity – mushroom cultivation, drip cultivation, preparation of compost bins for producing fertilizer from vegetable waste, new varieties of high-yielding fruits and vegetables and others,
* Organization of regular technical training programmes for women from the surrounding communities and other stakeholders and arranging exchange visits among the regional centres to share experiences,
* Development of knowledge products to improve women access to agricultural information (in local languages) for practical application
* Mobilization of women’s producer associations and co-operatives for improved market access.

As a result of these developments, women have been empowered to have a voice in their local community’s decision-making committees, especially in the selection of development projects which have contributed to the nation-wide reconstruction efforts.

A recent monitoring and evaluation of the project’s activities have confirmed the positive impact on the target groups and wider community resulting from the empowerment of the women and their contribution towards improved food security and nutrition and participation in decision-making in local communities which ultimately have contributed to the strengthening of post-conflict recovery efforts.

Some of the issues that came up during the project’s implementation which could inform future interventions for empowering Afghan women to play an active part in the agricultural sector for improved food security and recovery efforts are:

* Afghan women’s role in agricultural production needs to be differentiated from those in other countries as they are more strongly nuanced by social/cultural norms and religious tradition which define women’s land ownership, level of education, division of labour within household, status in society including their participation in agricultural activities, participation in production groups and access to markets and are also heavily contextualized to fit women’s other responsibilities – child care, household work, care of the elderly, among others.
* Despite these limitations, Afghan women contribute nearly 43% of the agricultural labour force and 90% in the livestock sub-sector’s but these are considered as extension of their household responsibilities and therefore, remain unpaid; women are concentrated at the lower end of the value chain: watering, weeding, harvesting and grading which are labour-intensive and time-consuming but withdraw from the upper-end of the value chain where financial transactions take place, as a result, they have no access to decision-making on the income or its control,
* The interventions need to go beyond creating new opportunities and spaces for women for participating in the agricultural sector to an understanding of the gender relations within the household and community and interactions among the different stakeholders governing the value chain dynamics of agricultural products; engaging men and raising their awareness are vital,
* Learn from the achievements and lessons of past initiatives for future interventions that would address the disadvantages that women experience for increasing their agricultural productivity and market access,
* There are immense provincial variations regarding women’s participation in the agricultural sector: more liberal in the western part as compared to the south and south-eastern which could influence the design of interventions,
* Absence of female agricultural extension services agents and female loan staff members in micro finance institutions deny women the opportunities to access new agricultural knowledge/information and financial support and these can be resolved with the right political will.

A few indicative questions for policy development and future interventions are:

1. Which are the main activities undertaken by women and men respectively in the agricultural sector and why?
2. How can women’s contribution in the agricultural sector be increased and higher value added to move up the value chain and take control of income?
3. What at are the potential entry points for women to gain access to higher financial gains in the agricultural sector for improving food and nutrition security and stabilizing peace among their community?