The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) welcomed a groundbreaking USD 65 million contribution from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to boost food security and support livelihoods of the most vulnerable rural communities in Afghanistan.

The ADB support represents a significant contribution to FAO’s USD 200 million crisis response programme for 2022 – and beyond – to raise local food production, protect livestock, increase rural incomes and improve the food security of poor and vulnerable people across the country as well as increase the resilience of women and help farm households access markets.

The aim is to achieve this through providing critical agricultural inputs and services, including the distribution of wheat cultivation assistance packages and livestock feed, veterinary support and the provision of vegetable cultivation packages and poultry, as well as small farm equipment and technical training.

The project seeks to reach all of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, with special emphasis on the major wheat and livestock producing provinces. The interventions will target rural communities experiencing the highest levels of food insecurity, many of which risk the proliferation of negative coping strategies such as selling off vital productive assets and growing displacement pressures.
“We are grateful to the Asian Development Bank for the generous contribution, which recognizes the urgent need to invest in livelihood assistance in rural areas in Afghanistan, and reflects that investing in agriculture is a core humanitarian response,” said FAO Director-General QU Dongyu. “Providing food insecure communities with seeds, fertilizers and other essential agricultural inputs in time for production will help them produce life-saving food and generate income, and is the most impactful way of reversing acute food insecurity in the country”.

Provision of time-critical livelihood support
With the new funding, FAO will provide crop and livestock inputs, including wheat seeds, fertilizers, to help 150 000 smallholder wheat producing families keep themselves fed, and livestock feed and veterinary support to assist 100 000 marginal livestock holding households. All told, these interventions will generate food and income benefits for over 1.5 million highly food insecure Afghans.

Farmers and livestock owners will also be assisted with technical training and veterinary services through local private service providers to ensure that the inputs provided lead to the best possible production and livelihood gains.

In addition, 140 000 poor food insecure rural households will receive high-quality seeds for backyard vegetable cultivation, poultry and a mix of small farm equipment, enabling them to produce highly nutritious vegetables and poultry, while reducing gaps in local food supply.

A major food insecurity hotspot
Afghanistan has rapidly become one of the world’s largest food security crises. More than half of the population – 22.8 million people – will experience acute food insecurity through March 2022, meaning they face severe challenges in meeting their daily food needs and in keeping their household food security stable and their livelihoods intact. Of this number, 17.8 million people live in rural areas and rely primarily on agriculture for food, income, livelihood and stability. The ongoing drought and economic crisis mean that they lack critical inputs such as seeds to secure their staple food needs for the year, and animal feed to keep livestock alive and supplying milk to their children daily.

About ADB’s umbrella project (FAO, WFP, UNICEF, UNDP)
The contribution is a part ADB’s larger umbrella project which is worth USD 405 million and involves four United Nations agencies, including FAO, World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The “Sustaining Essential Services Delivery” project seeks to support Afghanistan’s people by pooling the expertise and added value of the involved UN agencies and addresses shortages of essential services which have been threatening lives and livelihoods of the poor and vulnerable families in Afghanistan. These include the provision of immediate food assistance, health and education services as well as support to agricultural livelihoods aimed to stimulate the economy and sustain local food production.

Rural Women in Afghanistan: Out of sight but not forgotten
Jocelyn Brown Hall, Director FAO North America Liaison Office

It is news to nobody that the people of Afghanistan are facing an existential crisis. The fragile economy is near collapse. And, as the result of extended drought conditions, conflict, political instability and even COVID-19, Afghans are now suffering one of the world’s largest and most severe hunger crises. Half the population - 22.8 million people - will experience acute hunger through March of this year, according to the last early warning report compiled by the United Nations and donors such as the United States of America.

At FAO, we are concerned that one crucial piece of humanitarian action is being neglected in Afghanistan, which is protecting the country’s agricultural base. Over 70 percent of Afghans rely on domestic agricultural production for food or income. Paradoxically, those most affected by Afghanistan’s hunger crises are Afghanistan’s food producers. Of the 22.8 million people now facing acute food insecurity, almost 80 percent reside in rural areas and rely on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Women in Agriculture
Within this rural population, what about women and female-headed households? Women are vital players in Afghanistan’s agricultural economy. They are largely responsible for tending livestock. In remote and isolated rural areas, they keep their families alive through local and backyard food production. Since Afghan women often stay in the home and out of public view, we must not lose track of their needs when considering how we approach humanitarian action in Afghanistan.

The importance of keeping livestock alive, healthy, and productive cannot be overstated. For a family on the precipice of falling into acute food insecurity, just one cup of milk per day can make the difference between life and death. Veterinary care for an Afghan family’s sheep, goat or cow costs as little as USD 0.10-USD 0.80. Providing this care will guarantee a steady supply of dairy for the family as well as surpluses that can raise a family’s income by USD 35 per week. Conversely, if an untreated animal dies, the replacement cost, ranging from USD 113 to USD 682, is something that very few Afghans can afford.

A culture where women bear the brunt of the effects of food insecurity, often feeding their families before themselves, there is a double imperative to support local production, particularly for female-headed households.

Saving Livelihoods
In 2021, FAO directly supported 2.94 million Afghans with various emergency agriculture livelihood assistance packages. The winter wheat campaign supported 1.3 million people with certified seeds of improved wheat varieties. In the interim between the winter wheat and spring wheat campaigns, which is now, it is essential that we give priority to veterinary care to keep livestock healthy and productive in order to help families survive until the spring harvest. We also need to start investing in summer crops for which planting begins in March.

Humanitarian actions that include agriculture assistance, particularly livestock feeding and care, would serve as a firewall against acute hunger, keeping families alive and enabling them to plant next season’s crops. Agriculture-livestock that families can care for now, crops that rural families can use for sustenance and income - must be a core element of the immediate humanitarian response. Rural women must be among the targets that we reach with humanitarian assistance.
Investing in Women

Deprived of education and jobs, Afghan women face a discouraging future. However, according to Karima Sorkhabi, FAO Gender and Social Development Specialist for the western region of Afghanistan, “There is still massive room to support rural women involved in dairy production, poultry farming or livestock rearing, among others. Even more so with governmental programmes suspended now. Women need extension training to improve their skills. Facilitating trainings is key as it helps the community understand and recognize the important role that women play in these activities. Training paves the way to make women overcome cultural limitations.”

The United Nations has named March the month of Gender Equality (SDG 5). Beginning with International Women’s Day on 8 March, with the theme “Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Future” and continuing through the Commission on the Status of Women (14-25 March), the focus on the need for (and shortfalls in) achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment remains front and center worldwide.

While gender equality may be out of reach for Afghan women today, access to adequate food and nutrition should not be.

This post was originally published in FAO North America website.

FAO helps safeguard Kuchi livestock

Abdul Manan, 41, is a nomadic herder from Uruzgan’s provincial capital Tarinkot. He once had a herd of 100 sheep and other livestock. The ongoing drought, animal diseases and COVID-19 pandemic forced him to sell almost his full herd of sheep to cover for his family’s basic needs.

In Uruzgan, fresh pasture availability is scarce because of the ongoing drought and feed is too expensive for herders like Abdul Manan, forcing most Kuchi to adopt negative coping strategies like tactical distress destocking, wherein they trade their livestock at a much lower cost to simply get by. Selling one sheep would bring him up to 7 000 Afghanis (AFN) at the time (roughly USD 80), hardly enough to feed an average family for one month. Distress selling has brought his herd down to only 13 goats, two sheep and two donkeys, yet he is not able to feed them properly.

The continuing drought, economic crisis and the pandemic have severely affected the Kuchi nomadic households badly Kuchi, who rely heavily on livestock for their food security and livelihood. They live in remote areas and migrate seasonally. Kuchis’ only source of income remains livestock, raising livestock to earn a living by selling animal products like meat, milk, as well as other by-products such as yogurt, cheese, wool and hides.

“Kuchi herders are essential to Afghanistan’s food security through their contribution relating to animal products and by-products. However, the majority of them live a stressful life and are vulnerable to various shocks. FAO has persistently prioritized the vulnerable Kuchi herders to support them with emergency livestock protection support, keeping in mind the seasonality and time-urgency,” said Kaustubh Devale, Emergency and Resilience Officer for FAO in Afghanistan.

To support those Kuchi facing the loss of their only livelihood, FAO distributed concentrate animal feed to 630 Kuchi families in Uruzgan. A total of 4 410 animals from these families received health treatment, including deworming support in Tarinkot, thanks to the generous funding from the people of Japan.

After receiving the animal feed and health treatment (deworming medicine) from FAO, Abdul Manan has seen a 40 percent increase in the animals’ body weight, as well as up to 50 percent in their productivity. “A sheep that used to weight 25 kg, now weights up to 35 kg. Goats’ milk production has increased by at least 50% on a daily basis and that was very pleasing,” the Kuchi herder said.

“If I hadn’t received FAO’s crucial support, I would have sold all my remaining animals as well because I could not have afforded to buy animal feed,” Abdul Manan added.

Under this initiative, FAO also organized 15 training courses focusing on sustainable livestock and animal health management in drought context to beneficiaries provided awareness on COVID-19 pandemic in Tarinkot.

Afghanistan diaries

Fighting drought in Afghanistan - commitment and tears

An FAO officer, Jawid Sultany, goes back to Herat and finds a worrisome situation

I have to admit that I was obsessed with getting back to the office. I couldn’t wait for the security clearance of the FAO regional coordinator. As soon as I reached Herat, back from being relocated for almost two months in Kabul, I passed by the office, which is embedded in the Provincial office for the Ministry of Agriculture, and couldn’t resist myself to ask about it.

“You’re very welcome,” the new Taliban guard said.

I met with the Taliban watching over the office. They were interested in understanding what FAO does and they showed great enthusiasm about our work. “We need people like you in our country,” they said.

But they also told me they couldn’t make any decision as they were only guarding. But that was a start.

I was excited to go back to the field and understand whether the communities we work with have already felt the cascading effects of drought. The western region of Afghanistan is one of the regions most affected by drought. I wanted to grasp in situ the findings we will be drawing from the beneficiary profile survey we were conducting.

Hopeless farmers

I headed to Ghoryan, a far distant district, west of Herat, located in the lower stream of Hairroad river. As much as in the upper stream there is usually more water, Ghoryan is usually hit earlier and harder when there is drought.

The water shortage was evident. The land is dry. Canals are dry.
I met with some of the farmers we serve as part of the selection and profile survey to provide support for this winter wheat season. I listened carefully to all of them, one by one, as we went around the table. Their accounts were disheartening.

One man in his forties could barely speak. “I can’t continue with my life”, he said, and he began to cry.

It was very emotional. I couldn’t hold back my tears either, while I was trying to somehow soothe his profound desperation. He continued: “I borrowed seeds and fertilizers last season to plant the plot of land that I rented, for which I have to pay with half of the harvest to the landowner. But harvest was zero. I have a huge debt to the landowner for the rent, plus I need to pay back the loan for seeds and fertilizers.”

Many farmers were hopeless about their future. They think that foreign aid will stop, and so too will the opportunities to continue with their agricultural livelihoods. I explained that we will come back and provide seeds and fertilizers for the winter wheat season. In the western region, close to 140 000 people have been assisted in the provinces of Badghis, Farah, Ghor and Herat under this crucial campaign for the country.

Despite this support, the future does not look bright with another dry winter under the influence of La Niña.

**Cash-for-work**

This is why we are also reinforcing the cash-for-work programme. Together with their communities, FAO selects key water infrastructures (protection walls, canals, etc.) to be built or rehabilitated as to make the most out of the scarce water resources available. These activities also provide a lifesaving income for many who have lost their jobs or livelihoods.

Cash-for-work activities generate common goods for the communities as everyone benefits from these infrastructures, not only those workers earning a wage. On the one hand, there is the obvious benefit: the new infrastructure; on the other hand, the money that flows into the community and activates the local economy has great impact. In 2021, we had rehabilitated 80 infrastructures in the western region.

As it happens, with the provision of unconditional cash transfers, this is one of the preferred ways by fellow Afghans to receive relief support. They say they appreciate the freedom it provides to them.

**Livestock support**

Since I came back to Herat, it has been hectic. In addition to the activities that I have already mentioned, I have also been busy with the monitoring of the animal feed that we are distributing to 25 000 vulnerable families. This means that 175 000 people will have benefitted from this assistance.

At a time when prices continue increasing, providing supplementary feed is vital for many vulnerable people who otherwise could not afford it and be forced to sell their only livelihoods in despair. Each family receives 200 kg of concentrate animal feed, animal health treatment (like deworming to protect animals from internal parasites), and training in sustainable livestock management. The concentrate feed covers the animal feeding needs of an average livestock-owning family for two to three months.

The seeds certification process has also been challenging amid the political transition and economic decline. The Seeds Certification Directorate has not been functioning in a normal way. And it is understandable as the situation is somewhat chaotic: industrial labour has stopped in Herat, cross-border trade with our neighbours in Iran is non-existent, and health facilities are on the brink of collapse. And as our colleagues of the World Food Programme have been warning, the need for immediate food assistance has skyrocketed.

All of this make us work against the clock to ensure a timely delivery against the backdrop of dramatically increased humanitarian needs. The better assistance we provide to farmers and herders, the more chances of ensuring the bedrock of Afghanistan remains as solid as possible. Food production must be sustained for all Afghans to ensure they can provide food their families.

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**From Kandahar to Kabul and back**

Humanitarian professionals in Afghanistan have been through a whirlwind of change in recent months. Their commitment to staying and delivering for the Afghan people needed to be balanced against the need to safeguard their safety. In this dispatch from the field, Ahmad Feroz Aryan, FAO’s Regional Coordinator for the Southern Region in Afghanistan, tells his story of being relocated to Kabul and then going back home to resume his work in a changed Afghanistan.

**Evacuation**

Together with my wife and children, we had been relocated to Kabul in mid-July due to the escalating violence in Kandahar. When we left Kandahar, I was not expecting to come back any time soon. The combat out there was fierce, and I thought that it would last for a long time.

Once in Kabul, we lived at my brother’s place. Prior to the collapse of the government, I worked from the FAO Representation office. It was not easy to follow the projects in the south from afar. I tried to be as reachable as possible for our implementing partners in the southern provinces, but their limited internet connectivity made it hard. Well, not as hard as when the ‘white city’ was declared, and we had to work from home in Kabul. My internet connection was terrible. To make sure that I would be available, I had to get out every day to the peak of a hill. It was a bit surreal.

**Home again**

We got back to Kandahar [the second largest city in Afghanistan] at dawn on a Friday. We had travelled overnight from Kabul by road. Two months and 11 hours later, we were back home.

My first thought when we caught a glimpse of the city was ‘how would the office be?’ – even though some colleagues from PAIL [the provincial office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock] had already sent me some photos over WhatsApp to reassure me that the office had remained intact.

When I saw Kandahar, I also remembered what a strange feeling I had when the plane took off to Kabul. I came with nothing to Kandahar six years ago and this land gave me everything: my married life, my children, my joyful job, many friends, and the many people that I cordially love and work for. Paradoxically, we were forced to leave all the people we serve behind for us to be able to continue serving them in the future. I can say that this was definitely not a great feeling, but we needed to be safe in the first place.
A mission to Uruzgan, one of the most affected provinces by drought and conflict

Mumtaz Baryal, FAO Local Social Mobilizer, participated in a joint UN humanitarian mission to assess the situation and monitor field activities in a former battlefield

Back to work

Fortunately, I was back in Kandahar earlier than I would have anticipated. I was very worried about this winter wheat season and wanted to ensure that this campaign could be as successful as possible. Seeds needed to be in the ground before the end of December in the southern region.

Many farmers can’t afford quality certified seeds, or seeds at all. Seeds availability in local markets is limited and the government programme has failed to deliver as planned, for obvious reasons. The wheat season is vital for the whole country but especially for the southern region. I do believe our support package, also featuring fertilizers and urea, as well as specific agronomic training, makes a big difference for poor vulnerable farming families. Even more so under the current circumstances and coming out of a mediocre summer harvest. For less than USD 150, a family can meet their cereal needs for a year.

For this winter wheat season, we are supporting 10,900 families out of the 183,512 that FAO is supporting across Afghanistan. The Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance of USAID, Japan and EU humanitarian aid are funding these projects in the south.

Mounting needs

As vital as this support has been, it will not, by any means, be sufficient. FAO is working hard, but the needs are vast. I would say that every need in rural areas has been doubled during the current crisis in Afghanistan. Besides, we need to remember that drought is a slow onset phenomenon. Effects hit in cascade and tipping points trigger massive impacts in rural communities. Farmers and herders affected by drought take literally years to recover from this shock.

Some might never recover from drought; they might be forced to leave their rural livelihoods and move to urban or peri urban areas to join other displaced people. Therefore, we have no time to waste in order to help them build resilience to withstand drought, as well as to anticipate as much as possible its potentially disastrous consequences.

While I was in Kabul, FAO welcomed us with financial, psychological, and every other possible support in Kabul, but my place is out here in the field.

“Little did drought matter when you could not access your field because fighting was going on there”. This was a common comment I heard during my visit to Uruzgan province this month of February.

I joined a UN mission with colleagues from the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

We travelled from Kandahar, the southern hub of Afghanistan, to Uruzgan province, one of the most severely struck areas by the combination of armed conflict and drought. Six out of ten people are currently suffering crisis and emergency levels of acute food insecurity in Uruzgan, according to the latest IPC food security assessment. This is acute hunger. They are the ones who stayed in the province, for now. Many others, unable to access their land due to fighting and devoid of agricultural inputs, left to urban centres, regional capitals and abroad.

Our mission aimed to keep our finger on the pulse of the humanitarian situation, and monitor all field activities. Personally, I was interested in listening to farmers and herders to understand how we, FAO, can improve and scale up our assistance to meet their needs.

We were also there to pave the way for humanitarian operations in a province that has been hard-to-reach for a long time. As a battlefield, many areas were simply not accessible, but access is no longer an issue. Meetings with key stakeholders like community elders, humanitarian partners and de facto authorities took over another large part of the agenda.

Our first stop was in Chora district. I noticed clear signs of food insecurity among most people. Their eyes spoke of malnourishment, words from their mouths confirmed that they are skipping meals. Too often, they don’t know what their next meal would be or where it will come from. Hunger is clearly on the rise. According to the head nurse of Chora Clinic Hospital, they receive from 20 to 25 SAM (Severe Acute Malnutrition) cases every day. Although it is not news as it is estimated that 1.3 million children across the country are severely malnourished, I felt so exasperated when I heard that.

Agriculture, key to reactivate the economy

As for most parts of Afghanistan, agriculture is the main livelihood in Uruzgan. Arable land is available for cultivation and the terrain is suitable for animal husbandry. But (always but!), farmers can’t afford quality seeds and fertilizers due to the economic crisis. Livestock keepers and herders are experiencing dramatic levels of destocking, over 80 percent in many cases; if they need to buy something, food for their family, food for their animals or medical supplies, their only option is to sell animals. Simply their only choice, a desperate one.

I listened to many farmers. Many of their stories were depressing. They spoke with a unanimous voice. Their main concern is the lack of seeds, tools, fertilizers, herbicides, machinery. Unemployment is indeed another major concern. Most people I spoke to told me they are not able to find a job or daily wage opportunities to provide for their families.

FAO supported with the wheat cultivation package a total of 28,000 people in Uruzgan in 2021. This assistance consists of high-quality certified wheat seeds (50 kg), urea (50 kg) and diammonium phosphate fertilizer (50 kg), couple with specific wheat cultivation training.

This year our aim is to scale up the assistance and reach 108,000 people in Uruzgan with this wheat package. Overall, FAO aims to assist over 230,000 people in Uruzgan. The assistance also includes support to herders with animal feed and veterinary assistance, boosting alternative livelihoods like home gardening, providing seeds and training for summer crops, as well as offering cash-based assistance through unconditional cash transfers and cash for work projects to rehabilitate key water infrastructures.
Agriculture, a cost-effective intervention

During this mission I also visited some families assisted with the backyard poultry package. I talked to people like Shah Khan, a disabled man from Tarinkot district. He is the head of one of the 575 families that have received this type of support from FAO, which consists of 17 pullets, 3 roosters, 150 kg of feed, coop materials, drinkers and feeders. His daughter told me that the pullets they received “are already laying between 8 and 12 eggs daily, and that is the only income of the family now”. On top of that, eggs are also key to improve their nutrition. “Without this, it would be so hard to for our family to have anything to eat,” the 11-year-old added.

I had mixed feelings of sadness and hope after the mission. The situation remains dramatic. But this last conversation brought a bit of hope as well as validation to our work. Agriculture is definitely a cost-effective humanitarian intervention. It doesn’t only offer an immediate means to cope with hunger, but it also lays the foundation for resilience, while cushioning the impact of any food crisis. Agriculture support helps vulnerable communities create their own pathway to self-reliance and out of the crisis.

Queues of desperation

Across all three provinces, I saw large numbers of men and women queueing in front of former government offices, begging for help. “Please include our names on the aid distribution lists,” I heard several times from shaky voices, full of sorrow, of people standing in front of these offices where we had our meetings. The desperate call for aid coming from some of the most helpless people still echoes in my ears.

“They lost their family heads and bread winners to war and are looking for a simple piece of bread or any other little support,” some local authorities told me.

Since the political transition took place in August 2021, FAO has stayed and continued providing key lifesaving support to keep agriculture, the backbone of the Afghan economy, afloat. Amidst what has become the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, 1.37 million people benefitted from FAO’s assistance in the last quarter of 2021.

There is no doubt that the enormous humanitarian scale up has made a difference and has, so far, averted catastrophe, but it is not enough. There is an urgent need for increased assistance but above that to bring back economic stability to the country.

Protecting rural-based livelihoods in a fair, transparent and equitable way

Most rural people in northern provinces have been affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, an extraordinary drought, continued armed conflict and insecurity, flash floods, livestock disease and pests. Moreover, farmers in the region don’t have adequate access to certified seed and chemical fertilizers; and this lack of inputs and the need for modernization of agricultural and livestock farming has severely reduced the income of farmers and herders.

FAO continues to prioritize the assistance to the most vulnerable people in rural and remote villages to provide them with certified seed, fertilizers, animal feed and veterinary support, such as deworming medicine to protect their livestock against parasites. The various assistance packages help vulnerable farmers and herders harvest higher yields, keep their animal fed, healthy and productive, produce nutritious food for their families and communities, and generate income in different ways.

A mission to Uruzgan, one of the most affected provinces by drought and conflict

Mohammad Khalid Besmil, FAO Livestock Officer in Mazar-e-Sharif, travelled to northern provinces as part of a joint UN mission to ensure the fair distribution of assistance in line with the core humanitarian principles.

In February, I went on a joint UN humanitarian mission to Sar-e-Pul, Jawzjan and Faryab provinces in northern Afghanistan. I travelled together with colleagues from the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

We went there to meet informally with the de facto authorities at the provincial level and have an informal discussion. We are not working with them but they are ensuring safe access to carry out our operations. We briefed them about the UN rules and regulations for fair and equitable aid distribution, and we emphasized the commitment of UN agencies to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable people in line with core humanitarian principles (humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence).
In 2022, FAO will assist 54 513 households in the three provinces this year, thereby protecting, restoring and improving the livelihoods of 381 591 people. I am convinced that this assistance to agriculture is a key to both address existing hunger crisis and averting a wider economic collapse.

Nevertheless, I can’t stop thinking about those needy families since my visit to the three northern provinces. Fortunately, other agencies from the UN family are also supporting them to have something to eat every day and helping them send their children to school. If children don’t have proper access to food and education, and the basic human rights are overlooked, the future of the country looks dark. This disturbing thought is continuously haunting me. Sometimes I can’t even sleep at night.

A professional woman’s relentless pursuit to give rural women a voice

Karima Sorkhabi, FAO Gender and Social Development Specialist for the western region, Herat, Afghanistan

Karima Sorkhabi, FAO Gender and Social Development Specialist for the western region of Afghanistan, shares glimpses of her journey over the last half a year; from uncertainty and frustration to her return to office to chase her dream of improving women’s lives in her country.

The work of a woman as gender specialist might not be understood or even supported by many people in Afghanistan. But that was precisely what inspired me to step forward and prepare this personal account of my experiences. When I took up the challenge of working as gender specialist for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 2020, I immediately realized that mainstreaming gender into our programming, and subsequently into our culture, would not be an easy job. It would require massive efforts, careful attention, substantial interventions and lots of support, especially from colleagues and managers. However, I was determined to do my bit to pave the way for society to treat women equally and with the highest respect, regardless of gender.

I was not alone in this. Together with FAO colleagues, and humanitarian professionals from UN, NGOs and INGOs, we are all working to achieve the same goal: Gender equality, SDG 5. This will be achieved when women and men, boys and girls have equal rights, conditions and opportunities. Equal rights to access services and power; and equal rights to shape their own lives and contribute to the development of their society. FAO’s work is so important in this regard: supporting Afghanistan’s rural women and men to make their agriculture-based livelihoods more resilient, boost food production and better mitigate (and adapt) the impacts of climate change. Gender equality will really help drive further progress in these areas.

Rural women, key players for social change

I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to build a close connection with rural women through my job at FAO. I listen to them very carefully so that I can echo their voice and help FAO better adjust its assistance to their needs. I am truly grateful to FAO for this opportunity that allows me to dedicate my life to helping vulnerable rural women.

I have met many female farmers who play, day in day out, a crucial role in their families and communities, despite the limited resources they rely upon. Since I started my job, I have been so impressed by the positive impact they have in terms of achieving sustainable livelihoods. Indeed, women can bring about so many of the economic, environmental and social changes needed today. And tomorrow.

Relocation and political transition

Last year I was relocated from Herat to Kabul a few weeks before the city was taken over by the current de facto authorities. I was really afraid about my personal future as a woman. These worries grew exponentially as soon as I received the news of the political transition while I was at the FAO office in Kabul last 15 August.

During the first couple of weeks, there were rumours that the new de facto authorities would be going door-to-door identifying women who have working experience with international organizations. Some rumours said that women would not be able to go out without a mahram [a male relative that must accompany a woman when she is outside her family home]; others said they could no longer work or study, and so on. At that time, it was difficult to choose whom to trust.

Despite the chaotic, totally unimagined and, at times, tough situation, we were not left alone by the Organization. Daily meetings were organized by the FAO Representative to keep all staff abreast of all and any developments. A well-being virtual training session was organized by our headquarters colleagues. All that support was very effective for me to cope with the situation.

I was nonetheless afraid that the new de facto authorities would marginalize women like me, who have been amplifying the voice of rural women.

All in all, the situation remained unclear, and I ended up stuck at home over four months because women were (and still are) not able to work in the provincial office of the Ministry of Agriculture, where our office sits. Although I knew that it wasn’t always easy for the Organization, I kept raising my voice in virtual meetings to bring women back to the office to resume our normal activity.

I did not lose focus, nor did I give up my relentless pursuit to raise rural women’s voice at any time. Despite some expected, I guess, highs and lows, most of the time I was optimistic and trusted that FAO would somehow manage to find a solution, as it eventually did. The continuous focus on FAO’s duty-of-care, in particular towards women, was comforting.

On 8 December 2021, me and my other wonderful female colleagues in Herat finally resumed our work from a different office, provided by another sister agency (as we still cannot return to our main FAO Office in the city). That day my dream of going back to office came true. However, as I entered the office, vivid memories came to my mind from the day back in July when we were instructed to leave the office immediately and head to our homes. A scary chill ran down my spine again as I recalled my first thought: “how will all of this affect my children?”

A new different opportunity

Now, a few months into the political transition, I try to look on the bright side to overcome the mountain of anguish, fear and uncertainty that has accumulated in recent months. My organization is providing me full support to carry out my work; and overall humanitarian access is safe and unrestricted, unlike the months leading up to August
last year. In summary, I see an opportunity for me. And for FAO. I believe that I can continue striving for my vision of gender equality in Afghanistan, albeit with some caveats compared to what it used to be. I can continue helping women seize work opportunities outside their homes despite the culture, social norms and traditions.

There is still massive room to support rural women involved in dairy production, poultry farming or livestock rearing, among others. Even more so with governmental programmes suspended now. Women need extension training to improve their skills. Facilitating trainings is key as it helps the community understand and recognize the important role that women play in these activities. Training paves the way to make women overcome cultural limitations.

I am not naïve. There are still some restrictions, but I can visit women in remote districts, I can attend distributions of agricultural inputs like animal feed, seeds, cash and I can participate in training activities. As I have seen in my experience, FAO’s continued support to women in rural areas can be the spark to women’s empowerment; that little push they need to contribute to agricultural development on an equal foot than men.

**Planting seeds of hope in hearts of Afghan women**

*Nazifa Natiq, FAO Regional Resilience Officer in Mazar-e-Sharif, tells us how the cooking demonstrations she conducts in northern Afghanistan help rural women produce nutritious food and improve their family’s nutrition, while they generate a new or additional income.*

At the beginning of March this year, I went on a field mission to Sholgara district, Balkh province, just south of the provincial center Mazar-e-Sharif, to conduct a soybean cooking training to female farmers in Qadem village. Together with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and with funding from the Republic of Korea, FAO has been working to improve soybean varieties and production in Afghanistan. This will help Afghans have better access to nutritious food at affordable prices.

The soybean project’s components include variety development and certified seed production, certified soybean seed distribution, soybean processing, and market linkages.

Also known as “the poor’s meat” soybean is a rich source of plant-based protein. Soybean is being adopted by Afghans to combat the chronic lack of daily protein in their diet. In Afghanistan, malnutrition goes hand in hand with the chronic lack of daily protein intake as many families cannot afford meat protein.

While FAO support to rural women is significant, and the passion of the rural women that I visited remains fierce, the humanitarian situation is nevertheless getting worse every day. During my one-day journey, I witnessed clear signs of poverty, scarcity of food, unemployment and, more importantly, hopelessness across the district. The housing conditions of the people were poor, and the physical appearance of the children reflected their lack of access to nutritious food. Some participants had lost husbands to the decades-long conflict, leaving widows with no choice but to provide for their families on their own. Most women in the village are illiterate and FAO support to these women is pivotal.

I still remember the time in early August last year when we were relocated to Kabul for a short period of time due to the heightened insecurity at the time. I didn’t want to leave because I am happy when I am in the field working with women from the villages. But I did not really have a choice if I wanted to stay and pursue my work in the future. So it was great to be back in the field and meet a group of women that FAO was supporting with soybean seeds.

The soybean packages include 25 kg of soybean certified seed, 25 kg diammonium phosphate (DAP), 25 kg Urea and 250 gr inoculant to promote plant health.

I can’t imagine not being able to work and deliver the fundamental assistance to farmers, especially women. Although there are some restrictions now, I am content that as part of the UN, I can continue working to avert the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. I am optimistic that things will improve for some rural families with required agriculture and livestock assistance delivered on time.

We can’t let people starve nor face food insecurity. I will do everything possible to make sure women farmers can continue to produce food and support rural livelihoods.

I try to plant hope in the hearts of some vulnerable women across the districts and villages of northern provinces. I do this by organizing trainings to farmers and herdsmen, especially women, leading field missions to various sites, participating in distribution of assistance packages, and improving capacity of implementing partners and relevant counterparts in delivering the needed agriculture assistance to rural people.

I believe empowering rural communities through agricultural inputs and services is critical to raise local food production, protect livestock, increase rural incomes and improve the food security of poor and vulnerable Afghans, as well as increase the resilience of women and help farming families access markets.